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**The gentle hero in the Victorian novel: Thackeray, George Eliot
and Dickens**

Postma, Pamela Loveless, Ph.D.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1991

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THE GENTLE HERO IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL:

THACKERAY, GEORGE ELIOT & DICKENS

by

Pamela Loveless Postma

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The purpose of this study is to identify and define a character type that recurs in English literature from Chaucer to the present but that has its most complete development in the fiction of the Victorian period. This character type is the gentle hero, a literary construct that provides an alternative to the more familiar English gentleman and the traditional hero and embodies a social morality that is distinctly English and decidedly different from other, more aggressive, heroic models.

Dobbin in Thackeray's Vanity Fair, Seth Bede in George Eliot's Adam Bede, and Mr. Jarndyce in Dickens's Bleak House are all examples of the gentle hero. This study considers these characters as typical of the gentle hero and examines their novelistic function against the background of contemporaneous English society. Each helps to define a character type that is highly moral, mainly concerned for the well-being of others, somewhat passive in his response to adversity, consistent in his moral position, and quietly stoic. He suffers emotional loss, mainly because he usually fails to win the woman he loves, but he provides a moral standard by setting aside his own desires in favor of the happiness and well-being of his beloved. The gentle hero represents a morality that is self-abnegating, highly civilized, non-violent, and long-

suffering. He may have reached his apotheosis in the Victorian period, but in many ways he is decidedly the kind of hero needed by the present age.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The English Gentleman as a Source
for the Gentle Hero

Readers of English literature have long been familiar with certain traditional character types: the father figure, the ingenue, the femme fatale, the clown, the youth, the experienced older woman, the hero, to name a few. There is, however, an additional character type that has gone largely unnoticed, whose presence goes all the way back to Chaucer and whose culmination is achieved in the Victorian novel. That character is the gentle hero, a creation wholly English in outlook and design, the vehicle by which the moral freight of the novel is carried. The gentle hero is often overlooked--by the other characters in the book, by readers, by critics--because he sometimes seems peripheral to the major action of the plot. But the gentle hero, a nearly ubiquitous character type in the Victorian novel (Jane Eyre doesn't have one), is of crucial importance, for he embodies the novel's moral order and provides a model for human behavior.

Virtually all Victorian novels contain a dynamic hero, or main protagonist, whose fate is determined by the action

of the plot. One might naturally assume that the dynamic hero would be its moral center as well. An out-and-out scoundrel is seldom the dynamic hero (Clarissa's Lovelace may be an exception), and while he may begin his quest for whatever good he is after--generally a woman--in a moral fog, by the end of the book the fog will have lifted to reveal a character whose good fortune we heartily approve. Tom Jones is the paradigmatic dynamic hero; his career is certainly marked by plenty of action. He learns his lesson and is rewarded with the getting of wisdom and a wife.

But the dynamic hero is not necessarily the reader's moral tutor. With few exceptions the real moral center of the Victorian novel is the gentle hero, often a secondary character in relation to the plot, but one without whose presence the moral structure of the novel's fictional world would collapse. Imagine Tom Jones without Squire Allworthy, if you can. It is he, not his nephew Tom, who represents the moral order Fielding postulates.

The gentle hero has antecedents that go back to Chaucer's "varry parfit gentil knight." Shakespeare's Horatio, Sterne's Uncle Toby, Trollope's Roger Carbury, and even Conan-Doyle's Dr. Watson are all variations of the gentle hero. Despite differences of wealth, education, social position, and age, the gentle heroes of English

literature do share certain traits. First, the gentle hero stands in a position of moral superiority to the dynamic hero. The gentle hero is self-effacing, and while he is sometimes quixotic, he honestly endeavors to do good to others, often being taken advantage of in the process. He undergoes some growth of awareness, though this awareness is of a practical, not a moral, kind. He discovers something about the nature of the world that he had not known, but his own moral position in relation to it remains unchanged.

Despite his good intentions, his good deeds are often hindered by his own limited capacities or understanding. He may, therefore, make serious mistakes, and he often seems to lack energy. He is no saint. He may suffer embarrassment or pain and may lose the things he wants most in life because of his own diffidence or errors of judgment. But if the outcome of the dynamic hero is filled with more dramatic interest, the fate of the gentle hero is invested with more moral significance, for it is he who represents the moral order of the novel in which he appears. William Dobbin in Vanity Fair, Seth Bede in Adam Bede, and Mr. Jarndyce in Bleak House are all gentle heroes--self-effacing, destined to endure significant loss while forwarding the fortunes of those they love, and morally superior to most of the other characters.

To arrive at an adequate definition of the gentle hero it is perhaps wise to begin by comparing him to the English gentleman as a social type and to the traditional literary hero, for he offers an important alternative to both, even as he shares many of their characteristics. Recent years have seen a burgeoning of critical treatments of the role of the gentleman in English literature and culture. Shirley Letwin has examined the moral and ethical dimensions of the gentleman's code, using the works of Trollope as a framework for her analysis. Mark Girouard has written about the ethos of the gentleman in the Victorian period, as it derived from the ideals and legends of medieval chivalry. David Castronovo has constructed a detailed definition of the gentleman in English society. Robin Gilmour has discussed the function of the gentleman in the Victorian novel, tracing his antecedents back to Richardson and Sir Roger de Coverley. And Philip Mason has offered a definition of the gentleman, beginning with Castiglione and the notion of courtly love and ending with the novels of Thackeray, Dickens, and Trollope. These are but a few of the studies of the gentleman available to us, but they indicate the variety of approaches by which the Victorian scholar can consider this central figure.

Both the gentleman in society and the traditional hero in literature are important sources for the gentle

hero, even though each provides only a partial explanation of the gentle hero's function in Victorian fiction. And while historically much attention has been given to the traditional hero and more recently to the gentleman, no one has noticed that the gentle hero deserves a position alongside these two important categories of character. The definitions of the gentle hero and the gentleman overlap, and in many ways the existence of the gentleman as a type makes the gentle hero possible. But the similarities provide an incomplete picture, for the gentleman is basically a social being, while the gentle hero is primarily a moral one. What, then, distinguishes each?

When he was a young man working at a mission in Limehouse, Clement Attlee was delighted upon over-hearing a Cockney youth's definition of a gentleman: "a bloke wot's the same to everybody" (Girouard 267). Whatever his pedigree, the gentleman is expected to be outward looking, concerned, as John Henry Newman says, to be "one who never inflicts pain." The gentleman operates in society, apparently without seeking to control others, though, in fact, he may use good manners as a subtle kind of manipulation. His social graces denote an assured superiority that may result in others' bending to his will, but, in contrast, the gentle hero has no ulterior motives.

He may have a gentleman's manners but he doesn't use them to impose on others, either directly or indirectly.

A gentleman belongs to a certain class--he is not in trade, for instance--but his status is not determined by wealth alone. The financier Melmotte in Trollope's The Way We Live Now is not a gentleman--he is a social upstart and a foreigner of dubious background--while Mr. Farebrother, the impecunious clergyman in Eliot's Middlemarch, is. Breeding has a good deal to do with it. Samuel Johnson, ever the realist, said that it was "whimsical" to think of a gentleman as anything but a "man of ancestry" (Letwin 4). As William Sewell, the Victorian Headmaster of Radley (one of the lesser public schools, as it happens), so succinctly put it:

A gentleman...knows, and is thankful that God, instead of making all men equal, has made them all most unequal ...Hereditary rank, nobility of blood, is the very first condition and essence of all our Christian privileges; and woe to the nation, or the man by whom such a principle is disdained, who will honor no one except for his own merits and his own deeds. (Gilmour 88-89)

Here we begin to see important differences between the gentleman and the gentle hero, for the gentle hero is defined by his own worth and behavior.

Most Victorians viewed the gentleman with approbation. Moreover, to be a gentleman was to be forever recognized

as such. Mrs. Craik's John Halifax, Gentleman appears to make the case that a man in trade could rise to the status of gentleman, but she funks it in the end. Left a starvling, John Halifax works his way out of the mean streets of Norton Bury into the ownership of factories and the possession of a fortune, where he enjoys the "unsullied dignity of the tradesman's life." But when he finds his dead father's Bible, with the inscription "Guy Halifax, Gentleman," his success--and his status--is finally assured (Girouard 150). Even Fielding, who initially seems sympathetic on the issue of obscure origins, in the end provides Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews with pedigrees commensurate with their ultimate status. The unrecognized aristocratic orphan has a long tradition historically (in some ways Christ Himself is such a figure), and his recurrence underscores a cultural attitude toward social position that emerges again and again in English literature. There is, however, no such mystery about the gentle hero's origins, for background counts for very little in the formation of his character. The gentle hero may be a gentleman--like Mr. Jarndyce in Bleak House--but virtue, not status, is what counts with him.

The gentle hero can emerge from any walk of life. He can be a humble village carpenter, like Seth Bede, or a tradesman's son, like Dobbin, while only nature makes

the true gentleman. One has to be born to it. Anyone can act like a gentleman, but being one is another matter. According to legend, James I's old nurse requested that he make her son a gentleman. He replied, "I'll mak' your son a baronet, gin ye like, Luckie, but the de'il himsel' could na mak' him a gentleman" (Stratford 29). It's been said that it takes three generations to make a gentleman and three to unmake him, and there is and always has been more fluidity among the English classes than outsiders sometimes suppose. But the fact remains that the gentleman is assured of his status, if of nothing else. The Duke of Wellington said he was prouder to be an English gentleman than to be the victor at Waterloo, prouder of what he was rather than of what he did. This idea of inherent worth is distinctly English, and it indicates not only a historically hierarchical view of society but also an acceptance of life's inequities. Certain advantages may accrue to the gentleman without his having to deserve them; the gentle hero may deserve success but generally doesn't get it.

Dickens, like most of his contemporaries, adhered to the idea that if you are born a gentleman, you remain one (Castronovo 11). Many of his plots turn on the question of parentage, with a character's full delineation coming only with the discovery of gentle ancestry. Oliver Twist

may, by virtue of his behavior and strength of character, stand out from the debased environment of Fagin and his band of thieves, but behavior alone is not what finally confers upon him the title "gentleman." It is, however, the source and proof of the gentle hero's moral authority.

In addition to gentle birth, however, the gentleman should ideally possess certain traits of character. He is expected to be reserved, to hide his emotions, to speak with circumspection and to be ready to withdraw from unpleasantness at any moment. As Philip Mason says, "A proud silence, an austere reserve, were increasingly to be part of the right behavior for a gentleman as the [nineteenth] century wore on" (79). And Noel Annan says, "A gentleman disguised his abilities as much as he disguised his emotions: not to do so was to show side and drop one's guard" (20). Behavior was to be measured like a military campaign, following Castiglione's admonition that "in love no advance should be made from which retreat is not possible" (Mason 79). Significantly, the gentle hero is like the gentleman in his ability to keep still about his own state of mind and heart; in fact, he may be even more self-contained and inarticulate about personal matters than the moral type from which he both derives and differs.

In The Idea of the University Newman defines the

gentleman as modest, self-respecting, sensible, honorable, and retiring. He has

an intense horror of exposure, and a keen sensitiveness of notoriety and ridicule. It [the idea of the gentleman] becomes the enemy of extravagances of any kind; it shrinks from what are called scenes; it has no mercy on the mockheroic, on pretence or egotism, on verbosity in language, or what is called prosiness in conversation. (Victorian Reader 465)

Furthermore, the code of the gentleman "teaches men to suppress their feelings, and to control their tempers, and to mitigate both the severity and the tone of their judgments" (VR 465). Courtesy, good manners, and consideration are the hallmarks of a gentleman, whose own behavior leaves others free to act as they will. In Newman's words, the gentleman should be

mainly occupied in merely removing the obstacles which hinder the free and unembarrassed action of those about him; and he concurs with their movements rather than takes the initiative himself....his great concern being to make everyone at their ease and at home. (VR 466)

The gentle hero derives many of his characteristics from the code of the gentleman, as it cohered in Victorian England. In her brilliant philosophical analysis of the gentleman's code, Shirley Letwin goes so far as to see it as a positive alternative to Christian morality. She

describes the formation of an areligious, extra-Christian morality, whose demands draw on traditional Christianity but with some important differences.

In the conventional Christian view--St. Augustine's for example--it was believed that man could not control himself without the institution of the church to dictate his behavior (Pagels 28-32). Torn between passion and reason, the flesh and the spirit, St. Augustine saw man in need of the authority of the church to ensure that reason prevail. But, according to Letwin, the code of the gentleman, arrived at by psychological rather than theological means, offers an alternative, "individualist" morality that is supra-social, internally conditioned, and wholly spontaneous (Letwin ix). In her revisionist account, Letwin sees the gentleman's code as a reassertion of belief in free-will and self-determination, making man responsible for constructing his own morality and not simply obeying rules.

Though the gentleman's morality is highly individualist, the gentleman does not automatically reject authority, however. He respects others as well as himself. Whereas Augustine's sinner relinquishes his will, the gentleman nurtures his by developing a personal integrity that is grounded in the personality rather than in church doctrine. He accepts the community as his home ground

and develops a functional morality without necessarily repressing the self, as the church would have him do. He directs his attention to the public, social world of affairs, rather than to the private world of theological speculation, for he cannot function in isolation and is not troubled by subtleties of belief. For him society is the medium of the self. Lord Annan explains the gentleman's code as "an overpowering sense of civic duty and diligence....Loyalty to institutions came before loyalty to people" (Age 19). The idea of loyalty informs the character of the gentle hero as well, though in a radically more personal, less institutional form.

Letwin argues that a study of the gentleman can reveal the Victorians' attempts to discover, or recover, the moral foundations of the human community. Her focus is Trollope because, she says, he is so typical and so English. Henry James praises Trollope for his ability to capture the details of social life and to tell the truth about "the natural decorum of the English spirit" (Letwin 46). The English, James finds, have a "great taste for the moral question." In short, he says, the English novelists "know their way about the conscience" (Letwin 47). And in their books, it is the gentle hero, even more than the gentleman, who best knows his own conscience and most consistently follows its dictates.

It was during the nineteenth century, with its scientific revolutions and rigorous Biblical criticism, that the code of the gentleman began to crystallize as a modification of Christianity. Many Englishmen began to find Christianity too irrational, its strictures too demanding. According to Philip Mason, the English, unlike other European nationalities, developed a moral code that amounted to a "sub-Christian cult": "behaving like a gentleman" (181). An Englishman would be embarrassed to say that someone had failed as a Christian, because all have failed there. But he could assert that a man had failed to act like a gentleman (Mason 17), a damning charge. This view shows both tolerance for human frailty and the expectation that men will do what reasonable people agree is possible. Letwin points to the enormous importance the Victorians placed on the idea of the gentleman, finding "that the morality of a gentleman offers a more complete and coherent understanding of [the] human condition than any other" (xi), and that it is a distinctly English response to the question, "How am I to understand myself and conduct my life?" (Letwin ix). It is a question that the gentle hero, like the gentleman, often asks himself.

The winds of change blowing through the church in the nineteenth century were partly responsible for the cult of the gentleman and the development of the gentle

hero. Spiritual doubt in response to discoveries in the sciences called into question old verities and made many wonder how they could be certain of spiritual truth that rested on unprovable assumptions. New rules were needed, rules that were comprehensible and moral, without being so demanding as to make failure inevitable. A morality that was extra-religious and that sidestepped disturbing theological questions, was sorely needed. The alternative was ready to hand in the idea of the gentleman. Edmund Burke foresaw this when he said that

Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization, have in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles;...I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion. (Reflections)

For many Victorians the code of the gentleman provided a surer guide through a turbulent age than a theology that was beset from within and without by change and discord. And for many Victorian novelists the gentle hero, with his gentlemanly qualities of diffidence and restraint, was a more potent moral figure than the gentleman himself.

Newman was not the only thinker to attempt to define the gentleman. Another popular definition appears in The Gentle Life, published in 1864-92, where James Hain Friswell says, "One idea of a gentleman...[is] one who is indeed

gentle, who does his best; who strives to elevate his mind, who carefully guards the very beatings of his heart; who is honest, simple, and straightforward" (Gilmour 86). Emotional control is not the same thing as intellectual development, however. As Mark Girouard says, "In the code of the gentleman intelligence was a little suspect" (14). Lord Annan notes that for the gentleman "The temptation to intellectualize about one's calling was unwise....Men should be judged by their conduct rather than their ideas" (Age 20). A gentleman might be a little stupid, but his simplicity--often willful--was generally indulged as a virtue. George Eliot's Mr. Brooke is unquestionably a gentleman, though his imagination and moral perception are ludicrously limited. The gentle hero may possess the gentleman's simplicity and forthrightness, but he also has his wits about him. He may be deterred by reticence or custom from acting on what he sees, but he generally doesn't miss much.

Newman, as one of the most important contributors to the definition of the gentleman, sensed what Letwin sets out to prove: that the gentleman's code is a rival to Christian morality. Gentlemanliness, he says in one of his Discourses, is a "simulacrum" of Christianity, insidious because it appeals to pride, substituting "shame for fear," "modesty for true humility." When conscience

becomes "moral sense" and sin an offense against human nature rather than against God, then there has been a shift from what the anthropologists call a "guilt culture"--like Puritan New England, for example--to a "shame culture"--like Japan. Shame has more to do with the public acceptability of an act, guilt with its moral meaning, regardless of public opinion. From a strictly Christian point of view, guilt is, or ought to be, a more imperative corrective to human nature than shame. The gentleman, so deeply attuned to the public dimension of his acts, is more likely to feel ashamed than guilty when caught out, hence Newman's objections.

Gentlemanliness is superficial, he holds, because it emphasizes self-respect and good taste and makes pride its main attribute rather than self-surrender (Gilmour 90-91). Like Thackeray, who both admired and rejected the chivalric ideal, Newman was instrumental in both defining the gentleman and indicating his limitations. He naturally saw religion as far more significant than the code of the gentleman, but the gentle hero often gives little attention to religion. Though he may agonize over the correctness of his behavior, he generally does not resort to prayer or the counsel of priests to sort out his dilemmas but relies instead on his own sense of personal integrity. This is true even of George Eliot's Seth Bede,

who is the most "religious" of the gentle heroes under consideration here. And while the gentle hero does surrender his ego, his surrender is usually not to God, not to the church, not even to public opinion, but to an ideal he attaches to another human being: the woman he loves.

The Victorian gentleman's attitude toward women indicates the extent to which romantic attachment could get in the way of correct conduct. According to Lord Annan, "Women were a potential snare and they should be treated warily. But good women were romantic objects and, because they were good, could be treated as such" (Age 20). Of course the relations between the sexes have always been invested with a sense of danger, but while the gentleman has a set of rules for dealing with various kinds of women--the sisters of one's friends are treated differently from parlour-maids or strumpets in the street--the gentle hero goes further and enters into an authentic, wholly engaged relation with a woman in order to discover and express a refined moral sense.

Robin Gilmour says that Newman's "sense of the gentleman's secret vanity illuminates the bashfulness of the Pendenises of Victorian fiction, and helps to explain why, in literature and in real life, the type found commitment so difficult" (92). Of Clough and Arnold,

Gilmour says that "their gentlemanly stance was a refuge from commitment, from the prospect of surrendering oneself to the transforming power of sex or politics or religion, and so losing the self-conscious inner poise that made life possible" (92). Gilmour concedes that Thackeray's Dobbin slips the net of Newman's definition and is the "remarkable achievement of Vanity Fair" (92). This is true mainly because Dobbin, the paradigmatic gentle hero, has an extraordinary capacity for commitment. Whether or not Gilmour is right about Arnold and Clough, his point about the gentleman's distaste for self-surrender deserves consideration. The gentle hero may tend to keep himself to himself as well, but, as we shall see, when he loves, it is with his whole heart.

Dobbin, who serves so well as the model for the gentle hero, differs from Newman's definition of the gentleman as an unbending ego because his pride is not vanity. The gentle hero may be diffident, as Dobbin surely is. He is all-too-aware of his own faults and foibles and is ever ready to retreat in embarrassment, but he does not question his own inherent worth, in part because his attention is not focused on himself but on others. His major concern is not how to get what he wants but how to give others what they need.

A gentleman may be a Christian, if only perfunctorily. A man may be a "Christian gentleman" with a strong commitment to religious practice--a Charles Kingsley, say. But in the Victorian novel the gentle hero provides a model of virtue with very little outright Christian coloration. Christianity is undoubtedly part of the gentle hero's character, but it is often an echo softly whispered. Christian tradition has much to do with the origins of the gentle hero, in rather obvious ways, but he also represents an alternative to both Christianity and gentlemanliness, for his morality is neither theologically conditioned nor socially defined.

The Traditional Hero and the Gentle Hero

In addition to the gentleman, the traditional hero has a tremendous influence on the development of the gentle hero, in both positive and negative ways. Like the gentleman, the traditional hero has roots in both life and literature, but for the most part he is a literary device to which are attached various cultural values. In England the traditional hero goes back to Beowulf, and he is a major force in medieval literature, which had a tremendous impact upon the Victorian imagination.

The institutions of chivalry and courtly love, which

helped shape and refine the traditional hero, were reanimated by the Victorians, who saw in the traditions of medieval knighthood virtues that coincided with a new emphasis on public service and personal rectitude. In its way, too, the chivalric ideal posed a threat to Christian morality, not because it was overtly anti-Christian but because it tended, ultimately, to secularize morality. In 1829 Dr. Thomas Arnold wrote, "If I were called upon to name what spirit of evil predominantly deserved the name of Antichrist, I should name the spirit of chivalry--the more detestable for the very guise of the 'Archangel ruined' which has made it so seductive to the most generous spirits." Dr. Arnold--who was far from being a sound medievalist--objected to nineteenth-century chivalry because it put honor before justice and "Personal allegiances before God." In some ways, personal relations became for many Victorians a substitute for religion. But despite Arnold's objections, by the time he died in 1842 chivalry was everywhere in the public schools, as well as throughout the rest of society (Girouard 164). Trollope's spoof in Barchester Towers of a Victorian peer's effort to restage a medieval joust--the infamous Eglinton tournament--had the same sort of relevance to the Victorian audience as a spoof of Woodstock would have had in the 'sixties.

The traditional hero is a man of action, often a soldier, an outlaw, or an adventurer. He fights to defeat evil, often without much subtlety. His virtues are manliness and physical courage, along with respect for the ladies. His value as a literary construct is that he embodies passion and aggression in a suitable and beneficent combination. Sir Walter Scott perhaps did most to popularize medieval chivalry, though he put a contemporary spin on ancient traditions, which, according to Girouard, in theory at least, "softened and dignified the conduct of war;...gave women an honorable place in society;...provided an education for young men which was calculated to give them physical strength, bravery, grace, courtesy, and respect for women" (33). If it can be said that we judge an age by its heroes, then the Victorians' obsession with Sir Galahad, Percival, and King Arthur tells us a great deal about them.

In addition to Scott, Kenelm Digby's The Broadstone of Honor (published first in 1828 and reprinted regularly into the 'seventies) sought to define the Victorian gentleman as a descendant of medieval knighthood. It was Digby who initiated the cold bath as a character builder, believed in the "natural gentleman," and was an unabashed apologist for all things chivalric (Girouard 58, 63, 64). After the horrors of World War I, when the bloom of chivalry

was blasted once and for all, the traditional hero quickly faded into the anti-hero of modernist fiction, but for many Victorian authors the traditional hero was a character type to be taken seriously, if not accepted fully. When an 1869 edition of Thomas Hughes's Tom Brown's Schooldays pictured Tom bowing in the attitude of a medieval knight at Dr. Arnold's tomb, the intent to evoke reverence, purity, and gentlemanliness worked.

C. S. Lewis, a twentieth-century critic born in the late Victorian period, points out that one of the most, if not the most, important contributions of the Middle Ages to the civilized world is the chivalric ideal, with "the double demand it makes on human nature" (Necessity of Chivalry 13).

The knight is a man of blood and iron, a man familiar with the sight of smashed faces and the ragged stumps of lopped-off limbs; he is also a demure, almost a maiden like, guest in hall, a gentle, modest, unobtrusive man. He is not a compromise or happy mean between ferocity and meekness; he is fierce to the nth and meek to the nth.

The medieval ideal brought together two things which have no natural tendency to gravitate towards one another. It brought them together for that very reason. It taught humility and forbearance to the great warrior because everyone knew by experience how much he usually needed that lesson. It demanded valour of the urbane and modest man because everyone knew that he was as likely as not to be a milksop.

In so doing, the Middle Ages fixed on the one hope of the world. It may or may not be possible to produce by the thousand men who combine the two sides of Launcelot's character. But if it is not possible, then all talk of any lasting happiness or dignity in human society is pure moonshine. (11-15)

Thackeray's Dobbin, the archetypal gentle hero, represents the paradox of the knightly ideal to perfection; he is both "meek in hall" and stalwart in battle, but, as we shall see, he nevertheless provides an alternative to the traditional hero. As Mark Girouard points out, if things were going fine, chivalry was all well and good, but one danger of chivalry was its remoteness from reality. As a means of meeting a crisis, it left much to be desired (270)--Lewis's panegyric notwithstanding--because its simple idealism, while providing a retreat from the stresses of the Victorian age, did not do much to alleviate them.

Despite its faults, however, Victorian chivalry did promote laudable, if sometimes trivial, values. The chivalric gentleman was meant "to respect women, live purely, train [his body], serve others, take cold dips and play the game" (Girouard 273). Ruskin, whose definition of the gentleman rivalled Newman's, believed the gentleman deserved to rule, in part because of the "largesse of revived chivalry" (Gilmour 87). The gentle hero, whatever his origins, is suffused with chivalric idealism, but he also has a practical moral effect on others that an impractical chivalry sometimes lacked, especially in the nineteenth century. Dobbin is the most obvious example, but other gentle heroes demonstrate this effectiveness as well.

The medieval knight was both soldier and suitor, a man of action and a man of feeling, a man of conquest and a man of civilization. It is worth noting that the patron saint of England, and of chivalry, is St. George, who is most often pictured vanquishing a dragon in the rescue of a lady. One especially turbulent painting of the Victorian period depicts an ethereal maiden leading the dragon by a string, as St. George swells for battle. Women, it is implied, are far more in control of their sexuality (ie., the phallic dragon) than men are, while at the same time needing to be rescued from it.

The sexual implications of chivalry and its influence on the traditional hero are especially important to the development and understanding of the gentle hero, whose main field of action is his relations with women. In his monumental study of the bourgeois experience in the Victorian period, Peter Gay says, "What makes the nineteenth-century novel such an informative witness is far less its journalistic precision than its capacity for analysing, representing and in significant ways distorting the erotic experience of contemporary culture" (Vol. II, 142). For good or ill, it is in the interplay between the sexes that much of civilization is created. Referring to Vanity Fair, Middlemarch, and Anna Karenina, Gay says that the "fundamental moral of the novel in the bourgeois

century" is that "civilization extracts its sacrifices, and whoever refuses to make them must pay for his erotic urges" (Vol. II, 152). The gentle hero makes those sacrifices, more often than not contains his erotic urges, and embodies, whatever his shortcomings, a conception of the virtuous man that pretty much defines Victorian morality at its best. In the aggressive and often imperialistic world he inhabits it takes as much force of character for the gentle hero to subdue the erotic wilderness within as to conquer a continent.

When Burne-Jones's Phyllis and Demophoon was shown at the Royal Water-Colour Society in 1870, the art critic Harry Quilter said that all of Burne-Jones's work "has some trace in it of that purely physical side of love, which he depicts in such strange conjunction with its most immaterial aspect" (Girouard 194). Girouard asks, "Why 'strange?' Perhaps because many Victorians believed that love and sex were separate and unrelated" (194), and it was the institution of chivalry which helped to keep them apart.

One important aspect of chivalry that is especially relevant to the gentle hero, then, is its emphasis on the relations between men and women. The forms of love vary, as do the forms of faith or of honor, and the larger culture always has more to do with the personal than many perhaps

believe. As Philip Mason points out, the aristocrat's attitude toward women and the plebian's were quite different and culturally determined. This difference goes back to Chaucer, when gentillesse was an important social distinction, a quality more likely to be found in a nobleman than a serf. Under the profound influence of courtly love, gentle behavior toward women came to have an almost religious, as well as a class, significance, with the alternatives for women themselves simplified to either adultery or sainthood (Mason 27). While women were seldom religious icons in the nineteenth century, they did achieve an exalted status, as in Coventry Patmore's long poem "The Angel in the House," an apotheosis of married love that became a byword for the Victorian woman. It is only fair to say, however, that the gentle hero addresses mainly moral issues faced by men. His moral qualities are decidedly masculine, rather than simply human, in nature. Women are of crucial importance to his function in the novel, but the moralities of men and women are seen as contingent rather than shared.

Never before had so many people put so much stock in personal relations as did the Victorians, and their literature, with its gentle heroes, reflects this. They ruminated self-consciously about the relations of individual men and women; their friendships were often long and deep,

their marriages marked by what to modern eyes looks like uncommon devotion and faithfulness (with, of course, some notable exceptions). When Leslie Stephen's first wife Minny Thackeray died, he was inconsolable for two years. And when he married his second wife, Virginia Woolf's mother, it was only after wooing her out of the depths of grief for her late first husband. Love often endured long after death, as Julie Stephen poignantly demonstrated by lying in despair upon her young husband's grave (Annan Stephen 115), or as the Queen herself showed by her perpetual--and to others, tedious--mourning for Prince Albert.

If it is about anything, then, the Victorian novel is about love (and money). For whatever reasons--a large female readership, a middle-class eager to find its own moral assumptions justified, a socially mobile audience trying to navigate the changing currents of economic exigency--in the end the overwhelming majority of Victorian novels contain romantic, that is to say love-related, plots. A good deal of the conflict in these novels has to do with who shall marry whom and for what reasons. And over and over again, we find not only the romantic couple but also a significant third component--the gentle hero--in what becomes a moral triad. As T. W. Heyck has noted, Victorian writers shared the values and assumptions of their

middle-class audience and were "able to establish an amazing intimacy with their public" (40). This intimacy, along with the character of the gentle hero, tends to ameliorate the didactic quality of much Victorian literature.

The gentle hero has significance, not just as a stooge or stage prop or confidant of the dynamic hero, but as a palpable moral force, integral to the novel's plot (more so than might at first seem apparent) and the resolution of its theme. He shares a romantic interest in the heroine, but beyond that he provides an unshakeable paradigm of moral response and personal rectitude. We know he is good because we see him act with honesty and disinterestedness, especially when it comes to women. In fact, it is his treatment of a particular woman that is paramount in our judgment of him. More than anything, he is judged by his character, while the gentleman, who may or may not be a gentle hero, is judged by his status, and the traditional hero is judged by his action.

Mr. Farebrother in Middlemarch may be a rather lax curate of the old fox-hunting school, with an unseemly fondness for gambling at cards and frequenting the local pub, but all this is harmless enough and only makes him human. Where it counts--in his treatment of Mary Garth, whom he loves--he is absolutely scrupulous, giving her up without ever declaring himself to her because he knows

she loves someone else. Such magnanimity occurs repeatedly in novels throughout the nineteenth century, and it may strike some readers as absurd self-abnegation. After all, what good is a man who won't fight for his woman? But the ethos of the gentle hero forbids aggressively self-interested acts, especially in the realm of love. It is here that a man's virtue is tested--virtue derived in large measure from Christian and chivalric models, the one having to do with free will, the other with respect, and both with sex. (It is well to remember that the Latin root of the word "virtue," vir, means "he-man.") If all this seems to make a fetish of frustration, it also embodies the paradox that dignity and passion are mutually reinforcing. For the English--particularly the Victorians--the nature, the quality, of the heterosexual relation becomes very much an expression of values that often have apparently little to do with love.

If a gentleman so treats a woman as to make her feel obligated to him, then he has failed. If he excites in her feelings that become obsessive or unfulfilled, then he has encroached upon her autonomy, thus damaging her in some essential way. By definition a gentle hero would do none of these things. Thomas Hardy's Alec D'Urberville, a putative gentleman but no gentle hero, commits his most serious crime against the liberty of Tess's heart. Using

sex to do it only makes things worse. He does not leave her free to choose for herself, but rather forces her to react to him. No gentle hero would attempt such a thing, and yet in other cultures, other contexts, such a male imperative would be applauded. The image of John Wayne's forcing his kisses on a squirming Maureen O'Hara is as familiar as her ultimate capitulation. This idea of male mastery has deep roots in the human psyche and Western culture. Its appeal is primitive and probably universal, but it is one the English have often attempted to reject. This rejection is most apparent in the gentle hero of the Victorian novel.

In a singular way the Victorians valued women and saw in them the opportunity for private fulfillment and moral development. As Stendahl puts it, "Love requires esteem, and esteem is possible only after woman is allowed to exercise her gifts to the full" (Gay 64). In the world of the Victorian novel the gentle hero evinces such esteem above all else. It is this ability which, despite his often solitary nature, makes him an essentially social creature, though his own selflessness is often the only reward for his being who he is. His success lies in the perfection of his own character rather than in the achievement of possession.

In her survey of Canadian literature, Survival, Margaret Atwood posits the thesis that England, America, and Canada are each shaped by a national myth deriving from their individual geographies, and the distinctions she makes help us to better understand the gentle hero. America has the frontier, a barrier separating the civilized from the wild but conquerable by anyone strong enough to throw himself against it. The American hero, who is essentially traditional in type and behavior, is successful at beating down obstacles (or going down trying), whether they be wild Indians, forces of nature, or a woman's reluctance. Canada, on the other hand, is engulfed by a wilderness with no discernible frontier, only the constant threat of all-powerful nature that will likely kill a man or drive him mad. Self-abnegation is of little use when confronting scorching summers or raging winter storms. But England is different. It is an island, where nature has long been tamed. The Englishman's enemy is not a barren plain, an impenetrable forest, or a snowstorm that can swallow up a hapless farmer when he goes out to feed the stock. The island myth throws men back upon society, pushes them into drawing rooms and country houses and village cottages. Other people are the Englishman's psychological landscape, and it is here where the gentle hero dwells.

In American and Canadian literature the traditional

hero is forced to exertion. He is active, often angry, aggressive, physically engaged. The gentle hero in English literature, however, displays no such excess of effort. He may work hard, like Seth Bede, but the resolution of his main conflict--working things out with his beloved--requires restraint rather than action. This restraint is part of the legacy of the gentleman's code, carried over from chivalric institutions, reshaped by the public schools, and made an accepted part of a polite society that tended to devalue the work ethic, even as it gave the world the Industrial Revolution.

The larger culture is very much at issue here. Martin Wiener explains the economic decline of twentieth-century England by looking to the conservative nineteenth century, when the English ambivalence about work and progress really surfaced: "The English character was not naturally progressive, but conservative; its greatest task--and achievement--lay in taming and 'civilizing' the dangerous engines of progress it had unwittingly unleashed" (6). An old Etonian gave a good idea of the fashionable attitude toward hard work when in 1860 he said, "I have a high opinion of successful men and I am not ashamed to confess it....It was the fashion some years ago to sneer at success...nay, indeed sometimes to revile it, as though it were an offence, or at best pretentious humbug" (Chandos

161). The gentle hero is not lazy, not socially pretentious, not artificially quiescent, but he does sometimes seem to lack force, to drift rather than to decide, to wait rather than to exert his will.

The fact that it was suspect in some quarters to strive obviously for success added to the climate that made possible the gentle hero, who often appears a failure. His virtue is tested not by his ability to slay dragons, though he often demonstrates physical courage; it is not proved by worldly success, though he is content with his lot in life. In many ways, the gentle hero belies the Victorian stereotype of the patriarchal domestic tyrant, for he is the model of an equally potent English type--socially connected, self-abnegating, altruistic, and "sound." In many ways too, he is a precursor of the contemporary feminists' ideal man--nonaggressive, nurturing, gentle. Although the influences that led Thackeray, Eliot, and Dickens to develop gentle heroes vary as a result of the authors' own experiences, and although their gentle heroes are themselves rather different from each other, the moral imperatives that shape each of these heroes are essentially the same. These three are only representative examples, for the gentle hero is a character who appears again and again in the pages of Victorian fiction--a quiet, unassertive, but unassailable moral force.

CHAPTER II

THE GENTLE HERO IN THACKERAY'S VANITY FAIR

Introduction

While the gentle hero as a character type occurs in novels throughout the Victorian period, with certain identifiable characteristics, such as reserve, shyness, gentleness, and courage, the particular sources for the gentle hero vary from author to author. George Eliot's gentle hero derives from her belief in a religion of humanity that retains the essence of Christian charity while abandoning theological tradition and Christian doctrine. Trollope's gentle hero is the author's response to middle- and upper-middle-class English society, wherein diffidence, restraint, and decorum provide a palliative for political maneuvering and private domestic conflict. Dickens's reliance on the gentle hero undoubtedly results from his intense and unfulfilled desire to find a satisfactory parent. His gentle hero is most often a father figure who is benign but remote from the center of the dramatic action. And Thackeray's gentle hero reveals his creator's attachment to the ideals of chivalry and courtly

love, along with the author's simultaneous rejection of the traditional, romantic hero.

Vanity Fair is perhaps the best place to begin when tracing the path of the gentle hero in the Victorian novel, as it is a kind of argument by definition. Thackeray spends many pages exploring the nature and development of his gentle hero--William Dobbin--and arrives at as complete a picture of the type as we are likely to find. Much of the book is spent explaining how and why the false heroes fail and showing how Dobbin manages to combine apparent failure with absolute integrity to embody a moral ideal that removes the sting from the cynical world of Vanity Fair and finds a kind of peace in dignified retreat.

Since Dobbin is the complete model of the gentle hero, in part because we see his development from boyhood to advanced middle age, this chapter will tease out Thackeray's definition of that moral type from the dense texture of this panoramic novel. It will be most useful to look at the gentle hero in his two major roles--soldier and lover--and to consider his character in comparison to the other would-be heroes in the book: George Osborne, Rawdon Crawley, and Jos Sedley.

We see Dobbin's gentle heroism begin to emerge at Dr. Swishtail's Academy, where he fights the bully Cuff in the first of his battles, a run-through for the Battle

of Waterloo, the later conflict which forms the lynchpin of the novel. When Dobbin has finally grown to young manhood, he again engages in battle, this time in the realm of make-believe at Vauxhall, a kind of Regency Coney Island. Finally, we see him come to full maturity at the Battle of Waterloo. In each of these battle scenes Thackeray presents Dobbin in the guise of the traditional hero but with such heavy irony that Dobbin simultaneously displays the conventional hero's strengths--courage, loyalty, perseverance--and shows up his limitations--vanity, superficiality, egotism.

Any discussion of Dobbin is complicated by the fact that in Vanity Fair Thackeray so often makes fun of things he admires. His ironic treatment of everything and everyone, including the author himself, resists schematic analysis. Vanity Fair is, in fact, tightly organized, but it is so panoramic, so heavily populated, so various, that organizing arguments about it is rather like starting hares that run in all directions and decline to be ordered into neat little rows. It is undoubtedly what Henry James had in mind when he called the typical English novel a "loose, baggy monster." Granted the novel's complexity and plenitude, the best approach to understanding its gentle hero will be to follow the novel more-or-less chronologically, beginning with Dobbin as an awkward child

and concluding with him as a mature husband and father. But first we need to look at Dobbin's relation to the traditional hero and the gentleman, the two character types the gentle hero so frequently replaces as the moral center of the Victorian novel.

The Traditional Hero, The Gentleman, and the Gentle Hero

Dobbin's relation to the traditional hero and the idea of the gentleman shows up early on, for Thackeray is well aware of the importance of the gentleman as an ideal and the role of the traditional hero in literature. Though he admired the heroism of a Wellington or a Nelson and valued his own status as a gentleman, (he himself questioned the suitability of a career as an author for someone who called himself a gentleman) he nevertheless rejects, at least partially, both the traditional hero and the gentleman as ideal human types and examines their separate roles in two ways: in war and in love. Thackeray views his major male characters as soldiers and husbands and demonstrates that it is the gentle hero who succeeds best as both. Of course, the roles of both soldier and lover are a composite of the traditional hero and the gentleman. This chapter will examine the gentle hero in both guises and show the particular combination of qualities

that shape his nature, for it is in this way that we can best approach Thackeray's moral position and his definition of virtue.

In Vanity Fair the conventional hero owes most of his coloration to the traditions of chivalry and courtly love, traditions that both appealed to Thackeray and disgusted him. His gentle hero is shaped by the chivalric ideal, and Dobbin is both an example of an ideal "knight" and a deflation of conventional ideas of heroism. Dobbin is chivalrous, and his love for Amelia is as courtly as Castiglione could wish, but even as Dobbin's romantic heart throbs, his experience exposes him to obstacles far too complex for traditional heroics to overcome.

Chivalry and courtly love--two terms that often appear in tandem--bring to mind two of the most basic human experiences: war and love. The medieval chivalric knight was one who was supposed to love honor and behave according to principles of fair play and physical courage. Spending his energies on the field of battle in service of his lord and lady was the route to personal honor--a virile expression of altruism and enlightened self-interest that followed certain commonly held rules of behavior. The service of one's lord might take many forms, but, according to Castiglione, the giving of sound advice was ultimately one of the most important. "What is the purpose...of all

this striving for perfection? What is the courtier trying to achieve?...Surely the courtier's real aim," says Philip Mason, "must be to win the esteem of his prince so that he can speak to him quite frankly and advise him to act with justice and liberality?" (56).

Throughout Vanity Fair Dobbin seeks to influence George Osborne's behavior, almost as if George were a Renaissance prince rather than a self-important manufacturer's son. At school Dobbin defends George and showers him with gifts, including "romantic books, with large coloured pictures of knights and robbers" (VF 51). Quite obviously, Dobbin misreads George's role in his own school life, but he nevertheless plays "uncouth Orson" to George's "splendid young Valentine his conqueror. He flung himself down at little Osorne's feet and loved him" (VF 51). Throughout the course of the novel, Dobbin loves and serves George--and loves and serves George's wife, Amelia. He urges George to do the honorable thing and marry her, when George is on the point of breaking her heart. He pleads with George to quit gambling and tries to intercede with George's father when Mr. Osborne cuts his son off. Dobbin becomes troublesome conscience plucking at George's sleeve, until at Brussels George tries to avoid him entirely.

Remnants of the chivalric ideal glow like embers in the heart of this gentle hero. They may make him appear

foolish; they may sometimes make him wise, but they in no way compromise his integrity or his morality. Wisdom is knowing the right thing to do; morality is wanting to do it. George fails at both, while Dobbin clearly wants to do good and quite often does. Dobbin is a good soldier and a loyal friend. Even George admits, "There's not a finer fellow in the service...nor a better officer, though he is not an Adonis, certainly" (VF 52).

In addition to fighting for his lord, a knight might also serve a married lady by fighting in her name and by making poetic declarations of adoration. Dobbin is Amelia's cavaliere servente, the courtly lover of a married woman who may serve but not possess. According to Philip Mason, "Dobbin would never have adored Amelia if he had not been a secret but ungainly priest at the shrine of courtly love" (14-15). And in Pendennis Thackeray writes, "Men serve women kneeling--when they get on their feet, they go away" (Monsarrat 145).

Thackeray was emotionally predisposed by his own background to the idea of the chivalrous gentle hero and a reverential attitude toward women. His earliest beginnings included the Thackeray family legend of his mother's thwarted elopement and contained the seeds of the romantic idealism that he would later both cherish and satirize. When Thackeray's mother was no more than

seventeen, she fell in love with a young man her overbearing grandmother considered unsuitable. To end the attachment the grandmother told her granddaughter that her beau had died and gave the young man the impression that the young lady had lost interest. The fellow went out to India to assuage his grief, and Thackeray's mother married Mr. Thackeray, who was himself posted to India. One evening when young William was only a very small boy, his father brought home a new acquaintance, who turned out to be none other than Captain Carmichael-Smyth, the young man Thackeray's mother had loved years before. One can only imagine what that first moment of recognition must have been like. There was nothing to be done, but the love that had flowered in England blossomed again in India, setting up a situation that must have been as painful as it was passionate. Before long, however, Thackeray's father died, leaving his young widow free to marry her first love. It's a wonderful story, worthy of a romance novel, and it begins a pattern of thwarted but enduring love that would recur in Thackeray's own life and figure prominently in his work and the creation of his gentle hero.

Thackeray himself was something of a gentle hero in his relations with his wife Isabella--whom he cared for when she went insane, but who finally had to be farmed out with a family in the country--and especially with Jane

Brookfield, the wife of his good friend Rev. William Brookfield and the woman Thackeray truly loved but could never marry. Thackeray was a man for whom love was all-important. In The Adventures of Philip he says of love, "Some people have the complaint so mildly that they are scarcely ever kept to their beds. Some bear its scars forever" (Ch. 25). The gentle hero in Vanity Fair grows out of Thackeray's own experience of trying to balance his passionate nature against his sense of honor. What is true of Thackeray is true of George Eliot and Dickens as well: they see that in order for human beings to live decently they must have a society based on principles of personal honor. For Thackeray that society is shaped in large measure by the traditional hero and the gentleman, especially in their relations with women, and the gentle hero in turn derives from both, but with signal differences.

In Vanity Fair it is old Miss Crawley who voices Thackeray's (perhaps ironic) approval of impetuous love--even the love of those who marry on "nothing a year," as Becky and Rawdon do, and as Thackeray and his wife Isabella had done as well. Of Lord Nelson and the notorious Lady Hamilton, Miss Crawley says, "That was the most beautiful part of Lord Nelson's character....He went to the deuce for a woman. There must be good in a man who will do that. I adore all imprudent matches....I have

set my heart on Rawdon running away with some one" (VF 105). That is, until Rawdon does run away with the little governess Becky Sharpe and Miss Crawley cuts her nephew out of her will.

Significantly, in Vanity Fair Rawdon is compared to Lord Nelson, but Nelson is just one of the real heroes who figures in the novel. Napoleon, of course, is the most important, as we shall see, and Jos Sedley is compared to Napoleon and King George III, while Dobbin is paired with the Duke of Wellington. These comparisons serve to deflate the very idea of heroism by their irony, and we shall have more to say on this point later on.

At any rate, in love the false heroes are rash and impetuous and do not demonstrate the self-control that chivalry demands. Lord Nelson may have loved his Emma, but when he died she was left isolated and penniless. Thackeray's Rawdon thinks it quite a lark to run off with Becky--and he does truly love her--but the move costs him his inheritance and ruins his chances for real happiness. George elopes with Amelia in defiance of his father, and while Amelia also truly loves her husband, his character is so flawed that this love only brings her pain. Jos contemplates an elopement with Becky, and she finally does effect a sort of abduction of the Collector of Boggley Wollah, but the results of their association are next to

tragic. Only Dobbin, the true gentle hero, evinces a suitable restraint. His love for Amelia is not impetuous or dangerously spontaneous but longlasting and devoted. His affection for her brings him heartache as well, but not at the expense of his integrity or his pride. As a gentle hero, he retains, if not the complete accoutrements of the chivalric knight or the courtly lover, at least an echo of chivalric feeling that lends a quality of reverence and dignity to a man who is, but only superficially, a buffoon.

In the Victorian period the relationship between a boy (of a certain class, to be sure) and his mother often had chivalric overtones. Paul Fussell points to the Victorian reverence for Mother as another locus of chivalry, not without implications for the gentle hero. In the late nineteenth century, he says, "[I]t was taken for granted that one's attitude toward one's mother should be conspicuously chivalric, if not reverential" (154). In 1818 Coleridge had called Mother "the noblest thing alive," (despite his suggestions that he felt his own mother had neglected him), and as Queen Victoria produced one child after another the image of Britannia changed from that of a warrior queen to that of a fertile "Mother Britain." Fussell goes on to say that Mother began increasingly to play the role of "the knight's courtly mistress" (157),

whose main duty was to prevent "her son's access to sexual pleasure" (160).

After his mother remarried, Thackeray, age five, was sent back to England to go to school. He did not see his mother again for over four years. Thackeray, of course, was not his mother's lover, but his early separation from her encouraged him to think of her in idealized terms, with painful longing and dreams of her remembered perfection. These same feelings of worshipful longing shaped his relations with all the women he loved, regardless of the circumstances, and formed a pattern that would be reinforced by his own unhappy matrimonial experience and take mature form in the adult's moral vision. Thackeray was well aware of his own romantic nature and could laugh at himself, as he laughs at Dobbin, but foolishness and self-deprecation are not mutually exclusive.

The chivalric hero, forced into separation from his beloved by the code he's sworn to uphold, may almost seem to be in love with the hopelessness of his situation. In a letter to his mother after his break with Jane Brookfield, Thackeray acknowledges the dangers of fulfillment.

Very likely it's a woman I want more than any particular one: and some day may be investing a trull in the street with that priceless jewel my heart--it is written that a man should have a mate above all things The want of this natural outlet plays the

deuce with me. Why can't I fancy some honest woman to be a titular Mrs. Tomkins?...What can anybody do for me? Nobody can do nothing: for say I got my desire, I should despise a woman; and the very day of the sacrifice would be the end of the attachment.--What a brute a man is that he is always hankering after something unattainable (Letters II, 813).

The Victorian gentle hero represents the moral ideal of sexuality tempered by chivalric restraint. As a human being, the gentle hero is prey to sexual impulses, but as befits a gentleman he seldom pushes these impulses into action, remaining, instead, sexually quiescent. The reader may be fully aware of the sexual motives that shape his action, but to the other characters his sexuality is all but imperceptible. And yet it is within the gentle hero that genuine love takes root, love with a potential for passion that inevitably remains "pure."

The relation between the gentle hero and the woman he loves, in this case Dobbin and Amelia, is invested with tremendous importance, for it involves not only the definition of love itself but also the self-control that is required of the gentle hero. The gentle hero demonstrates what often seems to be superhuman control, though not necessarily of everything. Mr. Farebrother in Middlemarch gambles at cards; Mr. Jarndyce retreats to his "Growlery" to vent his anger, and Dobbin shows minimal control over his awkward feet and gulping speech. But when it comes to sexual matters, the gentle hero never

falters, though from the modern point of view he may seem to be a model of impotence.

Throughout the pages of Victorian novels the characters who give in readily to sexual passion are the ones with moral limitations. They are not necessarily villains: George Osborne, who is at least partially redeemed when he dies for his country, is not really a cad, and Rawdon Crawley certainly is not. Stephen Guest in The Mill on the Floss is not a rake, and even Middlemarch's Lydgate, though bewitched by his vixen of a wife into betraying his highest principles, is hardly an evil man. Every one of these characters, however, suffers from a too peremptory libido. For true, simple, unwavering goodness, we must look to the gentle hero, who, during his time of trial, is cut off from sexual fulfillment by circumstance, but even more forcibly by his own character.

If it is true that we repeat in adulthood the experiences and patterns of childhood, then it is easy to see how Thackeray came to equate deep love with the same kind of irrevocable estrangement that characterizes the chivalric relationship. He tended to idealize the women he loved, beginning with his mother and ending with Jane Brookfield. He was far advanced into adulthood before he could see his mother as a woman and not as an angel. Not until 1852 was he able to write, "When I was a boy

at Larkbeare, I thought her an Angel & worshipped her. I see but a woman now, O so tender so loving so cruel" (Letters III, 13). His disillusionment here echoes Dobbin's long-delayed disenchantment with Amelia and his own eventual recognition that the love of his life, Jane Brookfield, was not the woman he had taken her for. In Thackeray's last, darkest novel, the eponymous Henry Esmond wonders if others have "knelt to a woman, who has listened to them, and played with them, and laughed with them--who beckoning them with lures and carresses, and with Yes smiling from her eyes, has tricked them on to their knees and turned her back and left them?" (Bk. II, ch. 15). Thackeray might well have said the same of Jane Brookfield and Dobbin of Amelia, though Amelia is nothing like so encouraging.

The traditional hero would likely meet such resistance with masculine force, verging on cruelty, the gentleman with elegant sang froid. But the gentle hero suffers the way real men suffer when they are denied the release of action or the comfort of requited love. In a way, Thackeray's ironic treatment of chivalry and courtly love serves to make Vanity Fair all the more realistic, for the gentle hero is the author's effort to locate morality in everyday experience. In this he was both a conservative and a realistic innovator.

Leslie Stephen believed that the only way to know a man was to understand his age and the "municipal law" that determined its conventions (Annan Stephen 302), what today's historians call mentalités. Thackeray was a genius at depicting the customs and conventions of his age--and of the age just before it--but he also felt he had a responsibility to help shape those conventions where they needed amendment, and for this task the gentle hero was one of his most useful instruments. In 1847 Thackeray wrote to Mark Lemon, one of the first editors of Punch, that he set himself up as a "Satirical-Moralist " and wanted never to forget

truth & justice and kindness as the great end of our profession. There's something of same strain in Vanity Fair. A few years ago I should have sneered at the idea of setting up as a teacher at all...but I have got to believe in the business, and in many other things since then. And our profession seems to me to be as serious as the Parson's own (Letters II, 282).

The chivalric ideal would seem to have more in common with the romance than with the realistic novel Vanity Fair surely is, but as Catherine Peters notes, Thackeray's kind of realism uses illusion to get at moral truth (51). Few writers are able to dispel the mere appearance of things so well as he. His realism has genuine moral force, and to achieve it he eschews romantic conventions, even as he retains an obvious fondness for some chivalric values.

He takes traditional character types and splits them apart to show the workings beneath the surface. For example, his heroine in Vanity Fair--we are offered a choice of two--is not the perfect virginal governess with an intrepid character but a spirited girl who is not pure (Becky) and a pure girl with next to no spirit (Amelia). The traditional hero--the Rob Roy MacGregor, the Sir Galahad, the Rudolf Rassendyll--is treated much the same way. There are would-be heroes with all the right trappings (George Osborne, Rawdon Crawley) and less-than-heroes with the wrong trappings (Jos Sedley) or no trappings at all (Dobbin). By splitting apart the character of the traditional hero, exposing his faults and weaknesses, and finding virtue in unlikely places, Thackeray does much to redeem the hero for the modern world, to depict men as they truly are, and to show the way to a moral life that is qualified in its success but far more valuable--and useful--than the band-playing, flag-waving heroics of earlier, romantic literature. The realistic novel implies--even demands--the gentle hero, for he is earthbound, not ideal, and offers a realistic model for behavior.

As Gordon Ray notes, Thackeray falls into the great English tradition of "massive realism," going for the first time beyond his master Fielding in providing an abundance

of the data of daily life (394-95). In the famous preface to Pendennis Thackeray says:

Since the author of Tom Jones was buried, no writer of fiction among us has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN. We must drape him, and give him a certain conventional simper. Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art (I, xvi).

The traditional hero is a congeries of exaggerated male stereotypes; the gentleman, on the other hand, is often artificial and simpering. To his credit, the gentle hero is unlike both. Even with his obvious limitations and foibles, his often awkward attempts at helpfulness, and his shyness, Thackeray's gentle hero is, above all else, natural. Thackeray holds

that the Art of Novels is to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality--in a tragedy or a poem or a lofty drama you aim at producing different emotions; the figures moving, and their words sounding, heroically: but in a drawing-room drama a coat is a coat and a poker a poker; and must be nothing else according to my ethics, not an embroidered tunic, nor a great red-hot instrument like the Pantomime weapon (Letters II, 772-73).

In Vanity Fair Thackeray gives a more realistic picture of the Regency and of Georgian England than any in the language. But far from being merely a historical novel, Vanity Fair considers "mankind's common moral experience" and documents "the revolution in manners that occurred between the reigns of George IV and Queen Victoria" (Ray

418). Perhaps an audience accustomed to silver-fork novels and historical romances would have preferred to draw a veil over the world's wickedness, not to call things by their right names, and to preserve the appearance of virtue while ignoring the presence of vice, but Thackeray had no patience with such self-delusion. "[A] polite public will no more bear to read an authentic description of vice than a truly-refined English or American female will permit the word breeches to be pronounced in her chaste hearing. And yet, madam, both are walking the world before our faces every day, without much shocking us" (VF 617). Paradoxically, it is the gentle hero who most effectively combats vice and, though they may not be mentioned frequently in fiction, he undoubtedly wears ordinary breeches when he walks the common earth.

Thackeray admitted in Fraser's magazine that he didn't mind unsettling the readers of Vanity Fair: "I want to leave everybody dissatisfied at the end of the story--we ought all to be with our own and all other stories. Good God don't I see (in that may-be cracked and warped looking-glass in which I am always looking) my own weaknesses wickednesses lusts follies shortcomings?...We must lift up our voices about these and howl to a congregation of fools; so much at least has been my endeavor" (Letters II, 423). Thackeray's greatness lies

in his not polarizing humanity into separate camps of ideal goodness and hopeless error. Thackeray did not suffer fools gladly, but he understood them, for he knew all too well the follies he himself was capable of. It is his special genius that he chooses a foolish man for the "hero" of Vanity Fair--a novel "without a hero" in the conventional sense, but with something far better: a man of simple decency and singular gentleness of behavior.

Certainly not everyone appreciated Thackeray's brand of moral realism. Ruskin said of his realism that it was like a fly that settles on meat and makes you sick of it (Monsarrat 1). But, as Juliet McMaster points out, Thackeray disdains the silver-fork novels (where we are likely to find the English gentleman), the Newgate novels (where we are likely to find the anti-hero, an inversion of the traditional hero), and the historical romances (where we find both gentlemen and traditional heroes) penned by many of his contemporaries, and he parodies them in Vanity Fair:

Thus you see, ladies, how this story might have been written, if the author had but a mind; for to tell the truth, he is just as familiar with Newgate [a notorious jail] as with the palaces of our revered aristocracy [which is to say not at all], and has seen the outside of both....we must, if you please, preserve our middle course [where most of us live] modestly, amidst these scenes and personages with which we are most familiar [ie., the gentle hero].
(VF 253)

It is Thackeray's realism and his encouragement of moral reform that led him to reject conventional heroic models and a romantic view of experience and to offer the gentle hero as a realistic alternative to the traditional hero and the code of the gentleman. Thackeray was often criticized in his own day for being too cynical, too realistic, even too pornographic. Recognizing the "radically unsettling" effect of Vanity Fair on its audience, Gordon Ray compares its impact on the Victorians to the revolutionary impression Joyce's Ulysses, with its notorious final chapter, made on modern readers (388). Today Thackeray's so-called cynicism in the face of human frailty is a congenial attitude; it was not so comfortable for his contemporaries, who were used to a more sentimental view of life. Modern readers, on the other hand, are sometimes disturbed by what many perceive as Thackeray's sentimentality, particularly in the character of Amelia. But she was, as Ray points out, quite in accordance with a Victorian ideal that did not seem silly in the nineteenth century. Moreover, in contrast to Becky, with whom she is paired, she embodies what Thackeray would put in place of the "standards of Vanity Fair...the life of personal relations, the loyalty and selflessness inspired by home affections" (Ray 422), where, most significantly, the gentle hero belongs and is in his element.

Life for Thackeray was redeemed by love. When Sir Pitt Crawley goes down on his knees and proposes to Becky, promising her she can have everything her own way, we are convinced, for all that he is so uncouth and disreputable, that his emotion is real. When Rawdon enjoys the domesticity of his life with Becky, is moved by love for his little son, or bids farewell to his wife on the eve of battle, we know that Thackeray expects us to judge him leniently. So too must we view Amelia. Her judgment and good sense may not be all that the world requires, but her feelings are true, her attachments profound. She is, from one point of view, gentleness utterly devoid of heroism, yet paradoxically Dobbin, as the gentle hero, is defined by his relation to her.

Anne Thackeray Ritchie says that it was Thackeray's intent in Vanity Fair to show a society of people "living without God in the world" (Peters vii). While Thackeray himself may have held on to a perfunctory faith, his business as a novelist was not to justify the ways of God to man but to be, as Wordsworth put it, a man speaking to men. He was in many ways a gentle hero himself; he was a dutiful son and both father and mother to his daughters; he had a capacious heart, and he offered the judgment of a man who has learned from his own experience how to turn bad luck, his own foolishness (he had squandered

his patrimony by the time he was twenty-one), and the deepest disappointments into, if not a happy ending, at least an endurable one. Complete fulfillment, especially in love, seemed to elude him, but he fought against bitterness and mostly won. His marriage was a disaster, his other romantic attachments problematic. Yet there is a sense in which he was quietly heroic in his response to both, and the humor with which he treats his characters in Vanity Fair he also directs at himself. This again is a sign of courage, for while one laughs it is impossible to be entirely afraid.

He did not see himself as a hero, though beloved by his many friends for his kindness and generosity. Carlyle, even after his friendship with Thackeray had cooled with the years, wrote to Richard Monckton Milnes upon his death, "He had many fine qualities, not strong in proportion: a beautiful vein of genius lay struggling about him--Poor Thackeray, adieu, adieu!" (Peters 267). Carlyle's farewell captures the tone and substance of the gentle hero exactly, with both his moral beauty and his imperfection, his generosity of spirit and his humility. In the real world no happiness is unalloyed by some sadness, no virtue untarnished by some hidden selfishness. If we would seek for a moral guide through the Vanity Fair that is all men's life, we must turn not to the traditional hero, who ranges

too far from the mundane, not to the gentleman, whose remote and often frigid code of behavior can easily become a barrier to emotional involvement, but to the gentle hero, who stands no taller than the rest of us but who has lessons for us all the same.

Dobbin Meets His First "Waterloo"

Dobbin's first big opportunity for heroism occurs at Dr. Swishtail's Academy, where the life of our gentle hero seems anything but heroic. The school itself is modelled on Charterhouse, where Thackeray had sweated out his Latin and submitted to his share of floggings. As Robert Southey described it, "Charterhouse was a sort of hell upon earth for the younger boys" (Darwin 48). And Lord Salisbury called life at a public school "An existence among devils" (Chandos 60). When Thackeray left Charterhouse, he wrote to his mother: "I cannot think that school to be a good one, when as a child I was lulled into indolence, and when I grew older and could think for myself was abused into sulkiness and bullied into despair" (Carey 26).

Dr. Swishtail's school is a difficult place for a boy like Dobbin, who, in addition to being quiet, clumsy, and dull, is, worst of all, a tradesman's son, whose

admission to the school is based upon "mutual principles"--"that is to say, the expenses of his board and schooling were defrayed by his father's goods, not money" (VF 45). His schoolmates tease him endlessly about candlewax and the price of sugar, yet it is out of this raw material, this ill-clad, awkward boy, that Thackeray constructs his most persuasive definition of the gentle hero as the moral superior of any aristocratic reprobate.

When we first see Dobbin at Dr. Swishtail's, he stands "almost at the bottom of the school" (in other words he is academically slow) and, because his father is a shopkeeper, he "merit[s] the contempt and scorn of all real gentlemen." Young George Osborne taunts Dobbin until he succumbs and replies honestly, but privately, "Your father's only a merchant, Osborne." Little Osborne, with considerable hauteur, says, "My father's a gentleman and keeps his carriage" (VF 45), carriage-keeping being one sign of superior status. This is all too much for Dobbin, who retreats to a far part of the playground and sinks into misery.

That Thackeray's identification with Dobbin's plight derives from his own childhood griefs lends poignance to what follows:

Who amongst us is there that does not recollect similar hours of bitter, bitter childish grief? Who feels injustice; who shrinks before a slight; who has a sense of wrong so acute, and so glowing a gratitude for kindness, as a generous boy? and how many of those gentle [!] souls do you degrade, estrange, torture for the sake of a little loose arithmetic and miserable dog-latin? (VF 46)

Dobbin's singular gentleness makes him an easy target for his schoolmates, and their teasing pushes him to develop those moral qualities that will eventually elevate him far above his tormentors. To compensate for his pain he looks for comfort where boys with an embarrassing background or an awkward personality have often looked: to romantic tales of high adventure, where traditional heroes seem to offer escape, if only through fantasy. In this understandable solace, however, lies the seed of a moral contrast that is to shape Dobbin's character and dominate the novel. "[Q]uite lonely, and almost happy," Dobbin pours over a well-thumbed copy of the Arabian Nights, whose pages become a magic carpet bearing him away from the taunts and jeers of the boys who despise him. He dreams of "Prince Ahmed and the Fairy Peribanou in that delightful cavern where the Prince found her" (VF 47), as if he were rehearsing in his imagination the role he would later try so hard to play in Amelia's life, only to learn in the end that his strength lies in gentleness, not overt heroics.

In addition to being decidedly anti-heroic in outlook, Thackeray was likewise sceptical about romantic literature. He thought Byron dangerous and women all-too-often victims of Byronic heroes. In A Shabby Genteel Story the heroine is softened up for her seducer by "these tender kind-hearted, silly books" (quoted in Peters 79). In contrast, it is the real world that calls young Dobbin from such books when he hears the cries of little George Osborne, who is being beaten by the bully Cuff.

Down came the stump with a great thump on the child's hand. A moan followed. Dobbin looked up. The Princess Peribanou had fled into the inmost cavern with Prince Ahmed: the Roc had whisked away Sinbad the Sailor out of the Valley of Diamonds out of sight, far into the clouds: and there was every-day life before honest William; and a big boy beating a little one without cause (VF 48).

Thackeray's gentle hero is continually turned away from the never-never-land of traditional heroism to the real world of familiar injustice, ineptitude, and unrealized hopes. His response is instinctive and grows out of an unusual degree of empathy. One who has suffered himself may be more likely to feel the pain of others, and the gentle hero does.

Despite the fact that George had bruited it about the school that Dobbin's father was "in retail," earning William the nickname of "Figs" and unleashing a torrent of derision, Dobbin leaps to George's defense. Because

of his inherent decency, certainly not because of the moral climate of the school, Dobbin despises the victimization of the weak (he will respond similarly to Amelia). His compassion is characteristic of the gentle hero, not of the public schoolboy generally, gentlemanliness notwithstanding.

George Melly, a Victorian critic of the public schools of his day, described the situation he encountered at Weston, where older boys were allowed to brutalize the younger ones without restraint: "...when such a sight was seen, I sat wondering how the elder ones could sit still and see such things....I am unable to understand why they did not hold themselves responsible...to protect the weak." Melly went on to admit that "Many of us try and most succeed in blotting out such recollections in after life" (Chandos 61). Obviously, Thackeray did not forget such scenes or accept them as necessary, inevitable, or beneficial to character-building, as many have done, and as Dobbin refuses to do.

The narrator tries to exculpate the system by emphasizing the ubiquity of its evils. "Don't be horrified, ladies, every boy at public school has done it. Your children will so do and be done by, in all probability" (VF 48). Gentle Dobbin, like the outraged ladies, is

aroused by injustice and brutality, though the narrator professes to be perplexed by his reaction:

I can't tell what his motive was. Torture in a public school is as much licensed as the knout in Russia. It would be ungentlemanlike...to resist it. Perhaps Dobbin's foolish soul revolted against that exercise of tyranny; or perhaps had a hankering feeling of revenge in his mind, and longed to measure himself against that splendid bully and tyrant [a nascent Napoleon, perhaps] who had all the glory, pride, pomp, circumstance, banners flying, drums beating, guards saluting, in the place. (VF 48)

Of course the narrator is as well aware of the irony in what he says as the reader is. Cuff, the bully, is tricked out as the hero, with drums and banners in abundance, while George and Dobbin are poor sports, or, worse, not gentlemen not to go along. Here is another difference, then, between the gentle hero and the gentleman. The gentleman is by turns a victim and a tyrant. He may accept a painful amount of ragging, or dish out gratuitous violence upon his juniors, depending upon who has the biggest muscles, but the gentle hero operates according to simpler, more consistently humane laws.

Even though George comes under Dobbin's protective wing once the fight is over, his loyalty unfortunately remains with the swaggering Cuff, who is more in the traditionally heroic mold. It sometimes takes a lifetime for the virtues of a gentle hero to be recognized, but a bully, whether on the schoolyard or at the negotiating

table, will always have some followers and be counted a hero, even in the face of his most palpable offenses. The world is not a dangerous place just because of the violence of the few but also because of the acquiescence of the many. Carlyle believed in the hero as a necessary force for good, but Thackeray saw with perfect clarity the moral limitations that power imposes on most men and the obtuseness of the mob when they experience the exhilaration of violence. The boys cheering for Dobbin and Cuff are not so different from the revellers at the Duchess of Richmond's ball on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo. It was not that Thackeray preferred a milksop to a man, but that he recognized the qualities a gentle hero must have in order to remain civilized and moral.

The fight lasts thirteen rounds. Not until the sixth do some of the boys begin to root against Cuff and only then because he seems to be getting the worst of it. Cuff knows how to box and has the initial advantage, flooring Dobbin three times in a row and splitting his lip. But Dobbin has guts and a natural left hook. He remains "as calm as a quaker" and with his shining eyes and bloody face has "a fierce and ghastly air, which perhaps struck terror into many spectators." He lands a notable blow "once on [Cuff's] beautiful Roman nose" (VF 49).

When he was at Charterhouse, Thackeray's own nose had been flattened by his schoolmate Venables, but Thackeray didn't hold this against him. In later years, he never forgot the "sickening crunch" when Venables landed the decisive blow that disfigured him permanently, but in adulthood Thackeray called his erstwhile assailant "one of the finest scholars in England--my old schoolfellow you know who spoiled my profile" (Monsarrat 19). It would seem that Thackeray made no ungentlemanly protest. Still, there is a lot of Thackeray's own shy courage in Dobbin, along with a strong sense of fair play. The gentle hero may be roused to fight, but he does not hold grudges, cling to his own sense of martyrdom, or seek revenge as a traditional hero might do.

Thackeray's rhetoric then takes flight, and we see juxtaposed the flourish of romantic invention and the bathos of the real.

It was the last charge of the Guard--(that is, it would have been, only Waterloo had not yet taken place)--it was Ney's column breasting the hill of La Hay Sainte, bristling with ten thousand bayonets, and crowned with twenty eagles--it was the shout of the beef-eating British, as leaping down the hill they rushed to hug the enemy in the savage arms of battle--in other words, Cuff coming up full of pluck, but quite reeling and groggy, the Fig-merchant put in his left as usual on his adversary's nose, and sent him down for the last time. (VF 50)

Bernard Darwin notes that the public school spirit was expressed, in part, by a young man's readiness to be an officer and his willingness to shoulder responsibility (22-23). Despite his rough edges and his fundamental gentleness, Dobbin clearly has this spirit, though his military days are yet to come. Additionally, the military was a way up the social ladder for merchants' sons, for an officer's commission could be bought and along with it a gentleman's status. The code of the gentleman worked on the battlefield as well as in the drawing room. A gentleman was brave, steadfast, and loyal. If we recall other examples of officers' deserting their men or flinching in the face of battle (recent events involving Iraqi officers, say), then the gentleman's code becomes more than just a matter of social niceties. These qualities of the gentleman are present in the gentle hero as well, but they do not account for all of his character, as we shall see.

Much later in Vanity Fair, the narrator explains the importance of physical courage in the following passage, describing George Osborne, one version of the traditional hero, at his peak of manhood on the eve of Waterloo, long after the schoolyard fight.

Into all contests requiring athletic skill and courage, the young man, from his boyhood upwards, had flung himself with all his might. The champion of his school

and regiment, the bravos of his companions had followed him everywhere; from the boys' cricket-match to the garrison races, he had won a hundred of triumphs; and wherever he went, women and men had admired and envied him. What qualities are there for which a man gets so speedy a return of applause, as those of bodily superiority, activity, and valour? Time out of mind strength and courage have been the theme of bards and romances; and from the story of Troy down to to-day, poetry has always chosen a soldier for a hero. I wonder is it because men are cowards in heart that they admire bravery so much, and place military valour so far beyond every other quality for reward and worship? (VF 290)

Thackeray's paean to heroism is typically ironic.

Because George is obviously handsome, because he swaggers in the mess and throws his weight around at home, some might initially be gulled into accepting him as a heroic ideal. But the truth is that at school he either instigates trouble, like the time he cuts the tassels off Jos's Hessian boots, or is himself cowed and bullied. George "remembered perfectly well being thrashed by Joseph Sedley, when the latter was a big, swaggering, hobbadyhoy, and George an impudent urchin of ten years old" (VF 37). In maturity George may look like a gentleman and be taken for a hero, but he is still impudent and careless of others. Dobbin, on the other hand, never overcomes his awkward appearance, but the bravery of his gawky youth becomes the discipline and generosity of his maturity.

Dr. Swishtail's Academy demonstrates the importance of the public schools in the shaping of English gentlemen.

Surviving a public school education was not just a way to acquire learning; it was a rite of initiation into the class that would rule an empire. The Duke of Wellington said that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. Dr. Swishtail's may not be Eton, but the battle between Dobbin and Cuff prefigures Waterloo and is essentially the denouement of the great battle in miniature.

It seems after the fight with Cuff that Dobbin has victory in hand at last, but no triumph is ever complete in Vanity Fair. As soon as Dobbin wins with his fists, Cuff takes back the advantage by showing the, for him, uncharacteristic magnanimity of the gentleman and recapturing the boys' admiration. "It's my fault, sir--not Figs'--not Dobbin's. I was bullying a little boy; and he served me right," says Cuff to Dr. Swishtail. "By which magnanimous speech," the narrator says, "he not only saved his conqueror a whipping, but got back all his ascendancy over the boys which defeat had nearly cost him" (VF 50). Here we see an example of the gentleman (albeit a young one) using good manners to control others, without appearing to do so. But the point of the gentle hero, in Thackeray and elsewhere, is not that he triumph in the end. Indeed, it will often be the conventional hero who carries the day, sometimes by devious means. Perhaps Cuff is shamed

into taking the blame by Dobbin's courage. Certainly he knows how to manipulate public opinion. Whatever the case, the gentle hero's victory comes not as the resolution of some action or ascendance over others. His triumph is an expression of internal morality that is a shining example for those with the wisdom to see it and a silent rebuke to those who don't.

Though glory continues to elude him, Dobbin does gain respect after this episode. He finds that he has a talent for mathematics and surprises himself and everybody else by taking the prize for French. But Dobbin has not done with visions of conventional heroism and romance simply because he punched another fellow's nose and no longer needs to escape his oppressors. He has some distance yet to go before he can accurately judge others or perfect his own quiet virtue. He continues to be deluded by George, as he will later be deluded by George's wife Amelia, and credits George with "this happy change in circumstances," when his schoolmates cease their taunting. Dobbin, compared to the "uncouth Orson" in the "fairy-book," worships faithfully the "splendid young Valentine," and seeking to please his putative benefactor, gives George all sorts of presents, including "romantic books, with large coloured pictures of knights and robbers" (VF 51), which George accepts as no more than his due. In Thackeray's ironic

treatment of chivalry, Dobbin demonstrates the loyalty of a knight to his lord, fulfilling his part of the obligation such a relationship implies, even if George fails in his.

This chivalric bond between Dobbin and George will endure until long after George's death. It will be the cause of much misunderstanding and consequently of much unhappiness, and yet Dobbin's loyalty is one of the central qualities of the gentle hero. It provides the cohesion that society needs, even if it sometimes blinds those who possess it to the faults of those who might hurt them. Men can avoid the evil they see. But just as Thackeray's famous satirical drawing shows Ludovicus Rex to be invisible beneath his royal robes, so too most of us are obscured beneath the halo of other people's perhaps overly positive opinion of us. Dobbin takes a long time learning to see George and Amelia as they really are, not because he is inherently stupid but because the qualities that make him a gentle hero also make him vulnerable and often imperceptive. Dobbin is a man of complete, if flawed, character, as opposed to the traditional hero whose fine figure all too often contains an incomplete personality. It is significant that no one but Becky, whose mind is so much sharper than most, sees or appreciates Dobbin's brand of heroism until it is too late to do any of the

principals much good. It is easy to see why Thackeray's audience thought him cynical, when to all appearances his gentle hero comes up short, yet it is this incorporation of failure, along with ambiguous victory, in the gentle hero's character, that makes him a worthy model for the rest of us.

Interlude at Vauxhall: Dobbin and his Doppelgänger

The scene shifts abruptly after Dobbin's partial schoolyard victory to Joseph Sedley's inglorious defeat at Vauxhall, where Thackeray continues his contrast of the gentle hero and the traditional hero by satirizing both. There are two edges to his sword, however. The blunt side is for Dobbin, whose awkwardness may be amusing but is benign, while the sharp edge is for Jos, whose pompous and embarrassing behavior indicates an absolute selfishness. Jos's selfishness and Dobbin's gentle heroism are held up like mirror images of each other during the outing to Vauxhall. The pompous, portly Jos provides a comic doppelgänger, an inverted image of the gentle hero that, by its distortion in the looking-glass Thackeray holds up before us, shows, as nothing else could, Dobbin's true nature and the sad fact that one does not need to be inherently evil in order to be a consummate fool.

By the time our party has assembled for their evening's entertainment, the punch bowl young Dobbin had overturned at the Sedley children's party has long been forgotten, to be replaced at Vauxhall by a bowl of prepotent rack punch that upsets Jos Sedley's matrimonial designs on Becky (or, more accurately, her designs on him) and the equanimity of all concerned. Amelia has brought Becky home with her from school; Jos is back from India nursing his liver, and Dobbin, the gentle hero, is as awkward as ever. He, too, has been ill with yellow fever after serving in the West Indies, and his complexion does little to help his appearance when he arrives at the Sedleys' in "the hideous military frogged coat and cocked hat of those times" and makes Amelia "one of the clumsiest bows that ever was performed by a mortal" (VF 52-53). George and Dobbin talk "about war and glory, and Boney and Wellington, and the latest Gazette," where the victories against Napoleon are written up (VF 53). Eager and relatively inexperienced, they long to see action themselves.

By placing Vanity Fair in the years that saw Napoleon's rise and fall, Thackeray is able to place his gentle hero among actual historical events that naturally lend themselves to a treatment of traditional heroism and its inevitable limitations. More is lost at Waterloo than the eagles of the Emperor of France, though historically

that is what matters, of course. In Vanity Fair the flight from Brussels also marks the nadir of Jos's pretensions of grandeur. Thus it is that the downfall of the heroic Napoleon is linked to the fate of a buffoon, whose "defeat" at Vauxhall prefigures his rout at Waterloo, just as Dobbin's partial victory at Dr. Swishtail's school foreshadows his survival and competence at the great battle of 1815.

There is a great deal of action at Vauxhall, a kind of Regency Disneyland or permanent carnival, but not the sort the young officers have in mind. In fact, nothing turns out as planned. Dobbin falls in love with Amelia. Becky falls afoul of George, who doesn't fancy a governess as a connection. Jos botches his chance with Becky and disappoints nearly everyone.

The interlude at Vauxhall is also pivotal to the plot in that it presents five of the principal players all together for one of the few times in the novel. Later they will join up again with Rawdon Crawley to go to Brussels to confront Napoleon. But coming, as it does, on the heels of Dobbin's "victory" over Cuff, this chapter continues the development of the paired fortunes of Dobbin and Jos. Just as it is necessary to view Becky and Amelia as two sides of Thackeray's ideal woman, so too the heroic

ideal is lampooned in the figure of Jos and cut down to human size in Dobbin to produce the gentle hero of Vanity Fair.

Jos Sedley, the blustering "hero" of Boggley Wollah, with all his gentlemanly pretensions, is indeed ludicrous and would at first appear to have nothing in common with the gentle Captain Dobbin, but in fact there are numerous points of connection between them, beginning with their liver trouble. Jos, introduced to us on the eve of Becky and Amelia's return from Miss Pinkerton's Academy, has "Luckily" caught a "liver complaint," which has brought him out of a "fine, lonely, marshy, jungly district" (VF 28), where there are few white men and no amusements other than food and drink, and back to England for a cure. Dobbin's sallow skin is several times attributed to "fever," a common complaint of white men serving in the east, and although he is once reported by George's butler to have gotten drunk, he is relatively abstemious, especially in comparison to Jos.

Jos, "superabundant[ly] fat," has been done in by overindulgence, a proclivity--common among the English in India, where gin and tonic was invented--that he does nothing to change once back on his native soil. Far from living temperately, Jos embarks upon a life of endless dining out and primping before his mirror (there are many

mirrors in this novel). "Like most fat men, he would have his clothes made too tight, and took care they should be of the most brilliant colors and youthful cut" (VF 29). Thackeray achieves a high degree of irony in this passage describing Jos's vulgar sartorial splendor, a showiness the gentle hero would almost certainly try to avoid. Jos, the narrator informs us, is so pleased with himself that when he returns to India, he describes "this period of his existence with great enthusiasm, and give[s] you to understand that he and Brummel were the leading bucks of the day" (VF 29). In fact, Beau Brummel made his reputation not by dressing ostentatiously but by achieving an imitable simplicity.

Later in the novel, Dobbin, looking more sallow and sickly than ever, returns in the company of Jos from a stint abroad and the contrast between false and gentle heroism is reinforced. Dobbin goes to the Slaughters' and is served by an old waiter who remembers him. "You ain't got young," says the old fellow bluntly. "Ten years and a fever don't make a man young, John," Dobbin replies (VF 560). We have seen Jos primping and preening before his looking-glass, "his toilet-table...covered with as many pomatums and essences as ever were employed by an old beauty" (VF 29). Now we watch Dobbin dress for his first meeting with Amelia in a decade:

Major Dobbin, not without a blush and a grin at his own absurdity, chose out of his kit the very smartest and most becoming civil costume he possessed [not his military uniform] and laughed at his own tanned face and grey hair, as he surveyed them in the dreary little toilet-glass on the dressing table. (VF 560)

Thackeray, ever the enemy of show and pretence, deplored the gaudy military uniforms of the Regency period, a point he makes clear in the character of C. Jeames de la Pluche, a.k.a. Charles James Yellowplush, the Cockney footman of The Yellowplush Papers, whose name derives from his uniform of yellow tights and yellow Hessian boots (Jos had worn Hessian boots when a boy at school), complemented by a fur-trimmed purple jacket. As Thackeray continually reminds his readers, he too inhabits *Vanity Fair*, and if proof is needed, we can refer to his own descriptions of himself prancing around the court at Weimar after he had left Cambridge in the pink and blue uniform of Sir John Kennaway's Devon Yeomanry, because he thought the civilian court suits normally worn in Germany made their wearers look like footmen (Carey 29). In retrospect, Thackeray saw his own absurdity and would contend in Vanity Fair that the gentle hero never calls attention to himself.

Another point of comparison--and contrast--between Jos and Dobbin is their shyness. Both are awkward in the presence of women, though for far different reasons. Jos "was as vain as a girl; and perhaps his extreme shyness

was one of the results of his extreme vanity" (VF 29). Even his own mother sees what is wrong when Jos, flustered by Becky's interest in him, slips away from the Sedleys' house while his father sleeps and Becky sings at the piano. "'Miss Sharp has frightened him away,' said Mrs. Sedley. 'Poor Joe, why will he be so shy?'" (VF 32).

Shyness is not always a liability, however. In the proper circumstances it can be one mark of a gentleman, and it is almost a necessity to the gentle hero. Jane Austen's Mr. Knightly gives every appearance of being shy without being in any way inferior, and George Eliot's Seth Bede, though not a gentleman in the social sense, has a gentleman's diffidence. Shyness was generally taken as a gentlemanly ideal, but the shyness of the gentle hero is markedly different from the egoistical self-consciousness of a man like Jos, who seems unsure of his place in the world. The shyness of the gentle hero is a result not of self-concern but of his concern for others; it is diffidence, not social incapacity. Dobbin's shyness is that of a man aware of his own awkwardness who nevertheless believes in himself and in his duty to others. Jos's shyness is his admission of the shortcomings he seeks to hide beneath gorgeous clothes and alcoholic insensibility. Both may stumble and blush in the presence of a lady, but the similarity is on the surface only.

Thackeray satirizes the conventional hero in Vanity Fair, in this instance at Vauxhall, and pokes fun at the literary conventions of romantic literature by sharing his authorial options with his readers. Should the story be set among the aristocracy, with Lords and Dukes as the main characters? Or should he go slumming and retail the amorous adventures of the kitchen help? Or perhaps he might go in for the sensational by making the hero a homicidal thief. But no, "my readers must hope for no such romance, only a homely story, and must be content with a chapter about Vauxhall, which is so short that it scarce deserves to be called a chapter at all. And yet it is a chapter, and a very important one too. Are not there little chapters in everybody's life, that seem to be nothing, and yet affect all the rest of history?" (VF 55). The gentle hero likewise seems insignificant, yet it is he who represents the best and most enduring values--at Vauxhall or anywhere else.

Our narrator tells us that the Sedleys and Dobbins have come up in the world. Business has been good, no doubt owing to some war profiteering; money has been made; promotions have been secured. The outing to Vauxhall is for these up-and-comers the epitome of fashionable entertainment, but for Thackeray's readers it is a reminder that sic transit gloria mundi. As Geoffrey and Kathleen

Tillotson point out in their introduction to the novel, "Vauxhall Gardens is the outstanding example of a past fashion of entertainment recaptured in its one-time brightness and novelty; the modern reader is unaware of all this meant to readers of Vanity Fair in the forties, when the Gardens indeed survived, but in dingy decline" (xxxiv). The same fate awaits the conventional hero, if he but knew it. And though Thackeray would wistfully conclude that the same awaits the gentle hero as well, his disappointments are not absolute, even as his victories are not complete.

Among the Vauxhall entertainments, which Thackeray describes to the life, are a re-enactment of the Battle of Borodino, witnessed by Dobbin, who trails like a moonstruck troubadour behind the others and carries the ladies' shawls; and a panorama of Moscow, where Becky, jostled in the crowd, falls "with a [calculated] little shriek into the arms of Mr. Sedley" (VF 57). These scenes are depictions of two of Napoleon's most famous campaigns and foreshadow the very real confrontation that lies ahead--an intimation of the reality that will contrast markedly with the fairyland at Vauxhall and its "hundred thousand extra lamps" (VF 56). Just as Dobbin had been drawn away from his storybook to the blood and violence of the fight with Cuff, so too our "heroes" will leave

the conflicts that erupt at Vauxhall for the killing ground of Waterloo.

Jos's embarrassed response to Becky's petit accident is to regale Becky yet again with his Indian stories, the most famous of which involves a tiger hunt, where the majout had been dragged off his elephant and killed (something of the kind had happened to one of Thackeray's Anglo-Indian relatives). This account had sent Becky into paroxysms of delighted anxiety, but Jos had quickly assured her that "the danger makes the sport only the pleasanter" (VF 39). Jos's pretense at heroism is all utter foolishness, for the narrator explains that Jos "had never been but once at a tiger-hunt, when the accident in question occurred, and when he was half killed--not by the tiger, but by the fright" (VF 39). The image of Jos's pretending to rescue Becky in front of a panorama of a Napoleonic battle echoes the false heroism of the tiger hunt and helps to deflate the heroic persona, while preparing for Dobbin's practical good sense both at Vauxhall and at Waterloo.

While Jos plumes himself before Becky, and Amelia and George enjoy what will be their happiest shared moments, poor Dobbin is "as clean forgotten as if he had never existed in this world." Feeling himself to be "de trop," as gentle heroes are wont to do, he makes his way through the crowd and down "the dark walk, at the end of which

lived that well-known pasteboard Solitary." Dobbin recognizes his natural companion, saying, "I'd best go and talk to the hermit" (VF 58).

One of the central characteristics of the gentle hero is this very quality of solitariness. This is not to say that he is in any way an isolado, nor is he a Robinson Crusoe. He has plenty of company and often many attachments, but in some essential way he is alone in the crowd. His morality is selfdetermined, his loneliness, in the end and to some degree, unassuageable. The narrator, by identifying with Dobbin's plight, reinforces the universal quality of his loneliness: "to be alone at Vauxhall, I have found, from my own experience, to be one of the most dismal sports ever entered into by a bachelor" (VF 58). Dobbin is not alone in his aloneness, and in this sense we all share something of the gentle hero's experience.

Enter the bowl of rack punch: "the cause of all this history." The two happy couples retire to a box where they can take some refreshment and where "Jos was in his glory, ordering about the waiters with great majesty" (VF 58). After several courses and a good deal of champagne, Jos orders a bowl of rack punch. Thackeray reiterates that this is a "Novel without a Hero" in the same paragraph that he introduces a bowl of punch that most of the

participants don't even drink. "It influenced their life, although most of them did not taste a drop of it." Jos, however, does more than taste the punch; he consumes it all and gets roaring drunk.

If a hero is a great man who makes things happen and shapes events, then in a novel without a hero events should be shaped by pure chance. Of course, this is only partially true, but Thackeray's point is, once again, that the idea of the traditional hero is a false one. We must look to other sources for help and guidance; we must look to ordinary men; we must look to ourselves. The gentle hero is just such an ordinary man, and it is Dobbin who steps in to rescue the ladies when the other "heroes" botch the job of getting Jos to leave off singing, flirting, creating a commotion, and making a general nuisance of himself.

Mr. Osborne was just on the point of knocking down a gentleman in top boots...when by the greatest good luck a gentleman of the name of Dobbin, who had been walking about the Gardens, stepped up to the box. 'Be off, you fools!' said this gentleman--shouldering off a great number of the crowd [who had been watching Jos get drunk and egging him on], who vanished presently before his cocked-hat and fierce appearance--and he entered the box in a most agitated state. (VF 60)

The gentle hero is not always so successful at restoring order, and when he does manage to, it is usually temporary or incomplete. The purpose of the gentle hero

is not to achieve a perfectly happy ending like that provided by the traditional hero, but to act morally and selflessly, more in hope than in expectation of success.

Jos makes a very problematic hero indeed, but his drunken behavior is not enough to dissuade Becky from wanting him for a husband. She has no intention of marrying for love anyway. But all are agreed that Jos has behaved despicably. Even his valet, "the most solemn and correct of gentlemen, with the muteness and gravity of an undertaker, could hardly keep his countenance in order, as he looked at his unfortunate master" (VF 61).

This use of Jos's valet to comment on his behavior, a common device in Shakespeare and the comedy of manners, will be used again in the Waterloo episode. Like Jos's redoubtable Belgian valet Isidor, Mr. Brush is a comic figure who sets us laughing at the lapses of his master.

'Mr. Sedley was uncommon wild last night, sir,' [Mr. Brush] whispered in confidence to Osborne, as the latter mounted the stair [to Jos's room]. 'He wanted to fight the 'ackney coachman, sir. The Captin' [Dobbin] was obliged to bring him up the stairs in his arms like a babby.' A momentary smile flickered over Mr. Brush's features as he spoke; instantly, however, they relapsed into their usual unfathomable calm, as he flung open the drawing-room door, and announced, 'Mr. Hosbin.' (VF 61)

The next day Amelia, Becky, and George meet to assess the evening's adventures. Becky still has hopes of extracting a proposal from the Collector of Boggley Wollah,

and George teases her on the subject. He makes a butt not only of Jos but of gentle Dobbin as well.

'O Miss Sharp! if you could but see him this morning,' [George] said,--'moaning in his flowered dressing-gown --writhing on his sofa; if you could but have seen him lolling out his tongue to Gollop the apothecary.'

'See whom?' said Miss Sharp.

'Whom? O whom? Captain Dobbin, of course, to whom we were all so attentive, by the way, last night.'

'We were very unkind to him,' Emmy said, blushing very much. 'I--I quite forgot him.'

'Of course you did,' cried Osborne, still on the laugh. 'One can't be always thinking about Dobbin, you know, Amelia.' (VF 63)

The servant Brush makes a more reliable witness than George, whose assessment of Dobbin should not be taken too seriously. In any event, Jos, despite his attempts at a bogus heroism, appears weak and is. Dobbin may appear weak too, at least in George's eyes, because he is shy and socially awkward, but he has physical courage and a sense of propriety that Jos utterly lacks. Dobbin's stature as a gentle hero does not derive from an aristocratic bearing or elegance of manner and appearance. His gentle heroism may be less obvious than the more flamboyant character of what Kenneth Moler calls the "patrician hero," but it is genuine nonetheless.

Moler, in a perceptive essay on the "patrician hero" in the eighteenth-century novel and his appearance in Vanity Fair, describes the heroes of Richardson and Fanny Burney as typical of a pattern of aristocratic figures who rescue

and deign to love young women who are orphaned and socially inferior to themselves. These "patrician heroes" are elegant, articulate, and aristocratic. Their attentions are received with gratitude by the heroine, who is elevated and ennobled by this love. Moler notes that in Vanity Fair Thackeray creates in Becky Sharp a variant of Richardson's Harriet Byron or Burney's Evelina --Becky is a penniless orphan but not in need of rescue. She upsets the pattern of the "patrician hero" by transforming him into any number of failed heroes: George, whom Becky ultimately exposes as a "low-bred cockney-dandy" and a "padded booby"; the Marquis of Steyne, the very essence of aristocratic decadence; Joseph Sedley, whose imitation of heroism is mere farcical dandyism (172-79).

Moler fails to see, however, what Thackeray is doing with gentle Dobbin, Amelia's "second hero," whom Moler describes as "morally sound" but "foolish in his infatuation with Amelia" and "markedly antiheroic in appearance and manner" (181). Dobbin may be antiheroic in appearance, but the absurd frogged coat and military regalia of the period are as much a target of Thackeray's satire as is sallow, splay-footed Dobbin. And if Dobbin is not handsome, as George and Rawdon are, then so much the better for him, if, as is invariably the case in Vanity Fair, good looks are indicative of an inner deficit.

But more important than Dobbin's appearance is the quality of his love for Amelia--a love which does much to define him as a gentle hero--for there is no doubt that Dobbin's lifelong devotion to his friend's wife is far more than infatuation. Infatuation focuses emotional attention on the one who loves rather than on the one who is loved. If Dobbin were simply infatuated with Amelia, he would be far more concerned to possess her immediately and to worry about his own feelings than to act disinterestedly in her behalf. This is not the behavior of the gentle hero, for infatuation is by definition short-lived. Dobbin, however, spends close to a lifetime furthering Amelia's interests, seeing to her welfare, and remaining steadfastly loyal, without intruding himself upon her when he knows he would be unwelcome. In all this he is patently superior to Jos and George.

Dobbin is not foolish, nor is he infatuated. Readers may view Amelia as a pallid female with inadequate powers of judgment, but that is not what Dobbin sees. Love makes everyone blind to the shortcomings of the beloved, but that is often more a blessing than a fault. The most unfoolish thing about Amelia is her love for her husband and son, misplaced though her adoration may be. Dobbin is most admirable for his loyalty to George and his love for Amelia. We see the initial stages of that love at

Vauxhall, where Dobbin pathetically carries around Amelia's shawl, while she utterly forgets him, and where he intervenes to bring the Jos debacle to a close. Thackeray presents him in the guise of a somewhat lumpish traditional hero, carrying his lady's banner, as it were, defending her honor, or at least delivering her from the embarrassment of her drunken brother. In a way he is a rescuer, but not as a "patrician hero," not as the traditional hero of romance. His real achievement is as a gentle hero, whose behavior is unobtrusive, whose appearance is undistinguished, but in whom true altruism finds expression.

Carlyle's Hero vs Thackeray's Gentle Hero

The idea of the traditional hero, like the idea of the gentleman, captured the imagination of the Victorians; Thomas Carlyle, in particular, saw the hero as vital to civilization itself. In 1840 an admiring Thackeray attended Carlyle's lectures on Heroes and Hero Worship and was influenced in his early work by Carlyle's ideas on heroism. Thackeray's admiration was based to a great extent on Carlyle's lack of hypocrisy. As Thackeray said of The French Revolution, "It has no CANT" (Ray 224). We can be sure that when Carlyle declaimed upon the heroics of

Napoleon and Cromwell, his two exemplars, Thackeray listened, but he saw the limitations of the hero that Carlyle in his enthusiasm overlooked.

In his lectures Carlyle asserted that

Hero-Worship becomes a fact inexpressibly precious; the most solacing fact one sees in the world at present. There is an everlasting hope in it for the management of the world. Had all traditions, arrangements, creeds, societies that men ever instituted, sunk away, this would remain. The certainty of Heroes being sent us; our faculty, our necessity to reverence Heroes when sent: it shines like a polestar through smoke-clouds, dust-clouds, and all manner of down-rushing and conflagration. (202)

It would seem that heroes could deflect the millenium. And hero-worship is, Carlyle maintains, an instinctive and essential ingredient in human society. "Hero-worship exists for ever, and everywhere: not Loyalty alone; it extends from divine adoration down to the lowest practical regions of life." Further, hero-worship is the acknowledgement of the divine in all men and it provides what is essential for any community to work: order. The hero is, in short, "the missionary of Order" in the face of disorder and anarchy (203). Thackeray knew that the kind of order Carlyle hoped for was impossible. The fact that war itself is the traditional hero's home ground is proof of that. The gentle hero inhabits a world of inevitable disorder. His role is not to change it but

to accomodate to it and, more important, to take care of a woman in ways that traditional heroes often have little time or inclination to do. The traditional hero's greatness is manifested in the grand gesture, the gentle hero's in "His little, nameless, unremembered, acts/ Of kindness and of love."

Thackeray picks up on Carlyle's hero-worship of Napoleon, setting most of Vanity Fair in the years leading up to Napoleon's final confrontation with another great hero--the Duke of Wellington. These heroic figures cast long shadows over the novel, which is, as much as anything, about the failure of traditional heroism.

In Carlyle's view, Napoleon was indeed a hero, a great man thrown up by the disruption of the French Revolution to rescue France from anarchy. In order for the Revolution to succeed, says Carlyle, someone had to provide a "strong Authority" to "tame" it; Napoleon was the man. His undoing as a hero came when he failed to distinguish the true from the false, "the fearfulest penalty a man pays for yielding to untruth of heart" (241). Ambition led Napoleon to abandon la gloire pour la France for la gloire pour Napoleon. Carlyle saw where Napoleon had failed, but he saw too that Napoleon had had a grandeur that enabled him to tower over the imagination even of his enemies.

William Pfaff points out that before World War I it was still possible to "plan to become a hero" (105). Churchill aimed at heroism in his salad days, as did Theodore Roosevelt and T. E. Lawrence. In the nineteenth century individual heroism was a social ideal, "a complicated moral stance in which...moral courage, staunchness, idealism, fraternity, love of fellows, recklessness, nihilism, morbidity, a suicidal will, simple stupidity, and insensibility before danger triumph over the powerful natural impulses of fear and the urge to survive" (106). The gentle hero possesses some of these traits, to be sure. He is brave, loyal, often idealistic, and occasionally stupid. But he is not reckless, not morbid, certainly not suicidal. The hero is as concerned with his own prowess and prestige as with the aims of his action, whether they include rescuing women or vanquishing enemies. Recklessness, morbidity, and suicidal tendencies reveal a heightened concern with the self. The gentle hero is self-forgetful, and so others often forget him too.

A telling example of bravery winning out over prudence occurred at the Battle of Waterloo. When an infantry square faced the enemy, every soldier was expected to stand straight and hold his position or be considered a coward. At one point in the battle the 52nd took a direct hit.

One officer cried out, "Steady, men!" Afterwards, another officer said, "I never saw men steadier in my life...the shell burst, and seven poor fellows were struck by the fragments." When the same men were shelled yet again and some of them flinched, their commanding officer cried, "For shame, for shame!" When he speculated that the men were raw recruits, he noted that "In an instant every man's head went straight as an arrow" (Keegan 178). According to Lord Annan, "At Waterloo, officers courted danger to encourage their men....to take cover was thought to be a bit iffy" (Age 19-20).

George, Rawdon, and Dobbin are all officers at Waterloo. George, whom we have seen in the role of an infant hero during his schooldays, ironic though his treatment has been, is not ready for the real thing. He fails as a traditional hero as completely as Dobbin succeeds as a gentle hero. His death is reported with scarcely more than a single line. Thackeray had originally intended to dispatch George with "a ball in his odious bowels," a gruesome end to a superficially handsome life. But in the end he provides George with a cleaner, quicker death --a shot through the heart. A messy death would have underscored the transience of traditional heroism; a barely noted death that occurs off-stage underscores it even more.

Thackeray rejected Carlyle's ideas about the hero and came to see hero-worship as a positively dangerous thing. In his illustration for the frontispiece of the 1848 edition of Vanity Fair, he depicts a clown leaning against a puppet-box (the showman of Vanity Fair and his playthings; the author and his characters), a wooden sword at his side, a cracked looking-glass in his hand. He is surrounded by a crowd that includes Amelia and her baby in the foreground. All the figures have long asses' ears. In the background are two statues, one of the Duke of Wellington riding a donkey, the other of Lord Nelson standing on his head (Peters 146). In a world where all is vanity, all are fools. Heroes and hero-worshippers are foolish for glorifying the false, elevating the superficial, and assuming that for strong men all things are possible. The gentle hero seems foolish because he is likely to be awkward or shy. But there is no question which Thackeray thinks is the better man.

It is said that no man is a hero to his valet, but Carlyle, in Heroes and Hero-Worship, blames not the hero for being less than he appears but the valet for having "a mean valet-soul" (183). Thackeray, himself an uncommonly generous and compassionate employer, trusts the observations of servants and uses them as a dramatic convention in Vanity Fair to expose the follies of their employers. The Sedleys'

man Sambo knows at once that Becky is up to no good, and Jos's valet Isidor has the measure of his master. Catherine Peters points out that only Dobbin and Amelia, "who make no attempt at heroism, are beloved by those who serve them" (146). True enough. But both Amelia and Dobbin are guilty of hero-worship, the root of most of their difficulties. Dobbin's loyalty to George leads him to encourage a marriage that brings little real happiness to either partner. And Amelia's idolatry of her husband and son blinds her to the happiness that could have been hers for the taking. It takes Amelia and Dobbin a long time and costs them much pain to be disabused of George's heroism. In fact, the truth comes too late really to save them, but then only traditional heroes enjoy complete victories. Gentle heroes must make do with less, if only because, in the end, they know so much more.

Unlike Carlyle, Thackeray put precious little stock in military glory. In the Book of Snobs, as well as in letters, he expressed an intense dislike of the professional army and "the great game of war" (VF 290), perhaps in part because as a child he had had to endure Anglo-Indian stories of improbable bravery and adventure. He got his own back, though, with the invention of Major Goliah O'Grady Gahagan, through whom he satirized Britain's military history in India (Monsarrat 91). We see this use of Anglo-Indian

lore skewered to perfection in Jos Sedley, who is as far from being a hero as it is possible to get.

Thackeray's rejection of heroes and hero-worship is all but complete. In The Second Coming of Napoleon he rejects all forms of hero-worship and hypocrisy and, according to Catherine Peters, "contrasts public sham with private reality" (100). Alluding to Carlyle, Thackeray says that on Judgment Day, "we shall see Pride with his Stulz [a fashionable nineteenth-century tailor] clothes and padding pulled off, and dwindled down to a forked radish" (Works III, 398). Pretense and illusion are the inevitable accompaniments to Heroism, for only in fairytales does the hero preserve his facade intact. Thackeray knew that to deny what is human in order to serve a heroic ideal is to court disaster. Jos and George, a wouldbe gentleman and a flawed traditional hero, are done in at Waterloo, while Dobbin manages to save himself, Amelia, and his honor. When Thackeray says that Vanity Fair is "A Novel Without a Hero," he might better have said, "A Novel With a Gentle Hero."

The Gentle Hero and the Battle of Waterloo

"People were going not so much to a war as to a fashionable tour" (VF 253).

Like Fielding's mock-heroic battle in the Inn at Upton in Tom Jones, the Battle of Waterloo is the centerpiece of Vanity Fair, even though we never actually see the fighting. The battle is an ordeal and test for all the novel's main characters, but most importantly for its gentle hero, William Dobbin. According to Avrom Fleishman, Waterloo is

the turning point in the lives of most of the characters, and becomes a memory which grandly and darkly hovers in the minds of all. Its presence serves to fix events in historical time more firmly than in any other novel of the age....It is an epochal event that not only stands at the center of a nation's historical development, but shapes the destiny and character of all its members (quoted in Gilmour 146).

The Battle of Waterloo may be an epochal event, but it occurs at a distance. "Our place is with the noncombatants," says the narrator; Thackeray does not attempt to describe what he does not know, and he never was in a battle. Instead, we remain behind the lines where, according to U. C. Knoepfelmacher the "vanities of Brighton life [the point of embarkation for the army and its hangers-on] obscure all heroism" (56). In the carnival

atmosphere at Brussels it is difficult to find anyone except the gentle hero Dobbin and the seasoned Major O'Dowd who take the situation at all seriously. George is caught up by the Bareacres, who find him agreeable to know so long as they are on the continent but who are visibly contemptuous of Amelia. And Jos is full of bluster, initially incapable of appreciating the danger they are all in, later ready to abandon his sister, his pride, his honor, and his mustachios in order to flee an enemy that has already been defeated.

The epitome of these "vanities"--so foreign to the temper of the gentle hero--is the famous Duchess of Richmond's Ball, described in Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" as a "revelry by night," where "all went merry as a marriage bell" and the revelers cry, "On with the dance! let joy be unconfined," even as the sound of the cannon begins to reach their ears (Canto III, XXI & XXII). The Duke of Richmond, though not himself in the army, was an old friend of the Duke of Wellington, and "had come out to see the fun" (Howarth 28), rather like Jos and the other camp followers who find the excitement irresistible.

Even though Thackeray distrusted Byron and the romantic impulse, he agreed with Byron's characterization of this battle and believed that war leaves

its cursed legacy of hatred and rage behind to us, there is no end to the so-called glory and shame, and to the alternations of successful and unsuccessful murder, in which two high-spirited nations might engage. Centuries hence, we Frenchmen and Englishmen might be boasting and killing each other still, carrying out bravely the Devil's code of honour [that is to say, the traditional hero's code]. (VF 314)

The battlefield is the place where heroes are made, but for Thackeray it is a place of shame. Dobbin, who survives, is not in the ordinary sense a hero, and Thackeray makes much of Vanity Fair's being "A Novel Without A Hero," so a different name is required to describe what he is: gentle hero.

The events surrounding the Battle of Waterloo reveal the varying degrees of heroism displayed by George Osborne, Rawdon Crawley, Joseph Sedley, and William Dobbin. In every case this heroism--or lack of it--is judged primarily in the context of each character's response to women. We see very little of what happens on the battlefield, only a few rough outlines indicating that Rawdon acquits himself well, George is killed, and Dobbin performs his duty and more. Physical courage is important to the character of the gentle hero, a point already made when Dobbin "defeats" Cuff. But at Waterloo Thackeray focuses on the real front of moral life for most men: their social relations, particularly with women.

Robin Gilmour describes the structure of this moral forum in his discussion of Richardson's Sir Charles Grandison, where Gilmour says that women "provide both a chorus to the spectacle of his [the gentleman's] virtue and a little fireside school of courtesy....women...form the supreme court in which manners are judged, and as such are equal partners in the moralized community which grows up around the hero" (31). Gilmour is talking about the gentleman, but he might be talking about the gentle hero as well. But for the gentle hero a beloved woman is much more than a "fireside school of courtesy;" she is both the occasion of his moral life and a judgment upon it. Above all, she is crucial to his moral and emotional existence. Dobbin without Amelia would cease to exist, in contrast, say, to Hemingway's Robert Jordan, whose center of moral action is not a woman but the physical arena of male conflict.

Let us take each of Amelia's "heroes" as they prepare to go into battle and see how each acquits himself. George drags Amelia to Brussels, despite the unsavory social world to which she will be exposed and in the face of possible defeat by Napoleon. Dobbin, horrified, says aloud, "She can't go," and to himself, "think of the--of the danger." He holds his thoughts because he has been trying to persuade Amelia that George will be in no danger so she won't be

frightened. But in trying to alleviate her fears he has succeeded only in exposing her to risk, for George has neither the wit nor the desire to protect her. Having failed to keep her out of harm's way, Dobbin feels that "to be permitted to see her was now the greatest privilege and hope of his life, and he thought with himself secretly how he would watch and protect her. I wouldn't have let her go if I had been married to her, he thought. But George was the master, and his friend did not think fit to remonstrate" (VF 238). Here we have an echo of the chivalric ideal that dates back to Castiglione's The Courtier and reminds us of Thackeray's description of George and Dobbin's relationship after the schoolyard fight. Dobbin is still putting his loyalty to George above all else, even his love for Amelia, which shows as much as anything the gentle hero's reluctance to interfere or attempt to control other people's lives. The passage also shows the nature of our gentle hero's feelings; he is protective, that is to say, he is more concerned for Amelia than sorry for himself.

Clearly George fails Amelia in just about every way conceivable. When Becky chides him for having a "foolish little wife," George accepts her dinner invitation, despite the insult. "Another woman was laughing or sneering at [Amelia's] expense," says the narrator, "and he not angry"

(VF 274). Not only is George indifferent to Amelia's feelings, he also fails her in practical ways. His departure from her on the eve of battle differs markedly from Rawdon's farewell to Becky and reveals his insensitivity and incapacity. After he is killed, it is Dobbin who secretly arranges a stipend for Amelia and little Georgy, while she goes on worshipping at the shrine of the unfaithful and improvident husband she never really understood.

Rawdon, though far from matching Dobbin's gentle heroism, takes care that Becky shall be provided for should he not return. He wears his old uniform so she can sell his new one; he leaves her his best horses and his duelling pistols. Without sentimentality but with real affection, he plans for her future without him. This is probably Rawdon's finest hour, for after Waterloo, when he and Becky end up living in Paris, he is reduced to her "lapdog" and is ultimately unfairly imprisoned for her secretly accumulated debts. Eventually, Thackeray shuffles him off to a fever-ridden colony where he disappears into obscurity. Rawdon is not a gentle hero; he is an often weak, would-be traditional hero, who shows with considerable poignance how ill-equipped such a figure is when forced to function in ordinary society rather than in an all-male world.

Becky is an evil character, no doubt about that. She knows how to exploit her position to bilk men and betray other women, and she does this with gusto and not a shred of regret. She is not a fit moral guide or judge for anyone, yet with typical Thackerayean irony she truly makes Rawdon happy--for a time. "She had mastered this rude, coarse nature; and he loved and worshipped her with all his faculties of regard and admiration. In all his life he had never been so happy, as, during the past few months his wife had made him" (VF 284). Rawdon is not a bad man, and he deserves his moment of happiness, but he is not a gentle hero, and his moral faculties, though intact, are not highly developed. Rawdon cannot be a gentle hero, in part because Becky herself is so malign. A gentle hero cherishes a good woman, though in Vanity Fair this is perhaps not so simple a matter. At any rate, Becky is too evil (though Thackeray does admire her intelligence and spirit) and Rawdon too vague for him to be anything more than a failed traditional hero or a very diminished variation of a gentle hero.

Further, Rawdon "worship[s]" Becky not as a courtly lover serves a virtuous woman but as if she were in fact a female version of the traditional hero. In fact, very early in the novel her defiant departure from Miss Pinkerton's Academy is called a "heroical act," and at

the Sedleys' she cries, "Vive la France! Vive l'Empereur! Vive Bonaparte!" (VF 18-19), clearly relishing the Frenchman's audacity. Becky says that "Revenge may be wicked, but it's natural" (VF 19)--natural for a traditional hero. There is, Thackeray suggests, something quite unnatural in Rawdon and Becky's marriage. Rawdon, then, is not a gentle hero. But what of Dobbin? How does the Battle of Waterloo display his gentle heroism definitively?

As in the Interlude at Vauxhall, Dobbin and Jos are again contrasted to expose the variable natures of men under duress and to reveal the gentle hero at his best. Each behaves instinctively--Jos on his own behalf, Dobbin on Amelia's. The root of right action is revealed once again to be the capacity to love; the role of the gentle hero is to keep possession of his own integrity, while directing his action toward protecting the woman he loves, whatever her attitude toward him may be.

The contrast between Jos's behavior and Dobbin's during the events at Waterloo removes all doubt as to who is the better man, if by now any doubt existed. Thackeray seems to be holding his sides with laughter as he describes the ludicrous lengths to which Jos goes in his efforts to escape the apparently imminent arrival of the French in Brussels. With no intention in the world of coming anywhere near the fighting, Jos nevertheless fits himself out in full

military regalia in order to impress the ladies. "I should like to see the action," he tells Becky, "Every man of Spirit would, you know. I've seen a little service in India, but nothing on this grand scale." Smiling, one remembers the tiger hunt. Becky knows how to flatter a man as well as she knows her own name. "You men would sacrifice anything for a pleasure," she tells him (VF 295). One can just see Jos puffing out his chest and twirling in a most ungente way the new mustachios he is so proud of.

When the tide of battle seems to turn against the English, Jos's cupidinous valet Isidor brings the news, exaggerated for fuller effect, that all is lost. "Wild with terror, Mr. Sedley knew not how or where to seek for safety." Scrambling to join the exodus from Brussels, Jos flings aside the military coat that Isidor has been warning him against wearing because he covets it for himself. Jos figures there is no sense in looking like a soldier if that will only get you killed. But the mustachios, "which had attained a rich growth in the course of near seven weeks, since they had come into the world," make him look like a soldier too, so he determines to have them off. Frantic, he summons Isidor.

Jos had sunk in a chair--he had torn off his neck-cloths, and turned down his collars, and was sitting with both his hands lifted to his throat.

'Coupez-moi, Isidor," shouted he; 'Vite! Coupez-moi!'

Isidor thought for a moment he had gone mad, and that he wished his valet to cut his throat.

'Les moustaches,' gasped Jos; 'les moustaches--coupy, rasy, vite!' (VF 304) .

A means of escape is in no way assured amid the chaos, and Becky is able to sell Rawdon's horses to Jos at an exorbitant price. Panic-stricken, Jos scurries away out of the city, leaving Amelia, who bravely refuses to leave a young wounded soldier she is caring for. The outspoken Mrs. O'Dowd, whose husband, the Major, is away at the fighting, fires off volleys of sarcasm at the coward's retreating figure. "Look at him, Amelia, dear, driving into the parlour window....Such a bull in a china-shop I never saw" (VF 314). "Jos, a clumsy and timid horseman, did not look to advantage in the saddle," says the narrator with considerable understatement (VF 314).

Everyone shows his true colors when the pressure is on. Mrs. O'Dowd, who had seemed foolish and uncouth, turns out to be a resourceful, cool-headed military wife. Rawdon takes pains to leave Becky secure in case he should not return. George, fresh from an indiscreet flirtation with Becky, tries to steal away from his sleeping wife without saying goodbye, while Amelia awakens to embrace her husband one last time. Like a little child she moves us to pity. And Jos goes to pieces. Dobbin, as one would expect of the gentle hero, rises to the occasion, doing what he can

to assure Amelia's safety and showing himself to be a brave and realistic officer, who can face what must be faced, without denying the depths of his own feelings.

Dobbin is everything Jos is not. Where Jos is concerned only with his own comfort and prestige, Dobbin is genuinely concerned for others and is able to judge them accurately. He sees, for instance, that Becky is a hypocrite when she flirts with General Tufto in Brussels, while George, newly married though he is, sees only that she is an apple ripe for the picking. It is Dobbin, not George, who takes steps to provide for Amelia's welfare in Brussels when the troops are called into action. He awakens Jos (Thackeray emphasizes that it is Dobbin, not George, who has come on this errand) to say goodbye and to extract from him a promise to look after Amelia should the British fail. When Amelia interrupts them, looking pale and desperate, Dobbin gazes upon her "with inexpressible pangs of longing" (288-89). Dobbin has done what he can; all Jos can do is run away.

The Battle of Waterloo was a watershed in British history and it is pivotal to the structure and meaning of Vanity Fair and the role of the gentle hero. Robin Gilmour notes that Thackeray viewed Waterloo as the beginning of the decline of "an older heroic military code" and points out that Harriet Martineau argued in her History

of the Thirty Years Peace 1816-1846 that "the real history of England since Waterloo had been social and domestic rather than military and diplomatic." Further, Gilmour says that Vanity Fair is emblematic of what the Victorian critic E. S. Dallas described as the most important characteristic of the nineteenth century (60):

The development of literature in our day...has led and is leading to many changes, but to none more important than the withering of the individual as a hero, the elevation and reinforcement of the individual as a private man. This elevation of the private life and the private man to the place of honour in art and literature, over the public life and the historical man that have hitherto held the chief rank in our regards, amounts to a revolution. (Dallas 323-26, Gilmour 60)

In Vanity Fair the Battle of Waterloo marks the defeat of traditional heroism. Napoleon falls; Jos collapses; George dies. Even the Duke of Wellington's victory is short-lived. In 1844, writing under the name of "Trundler, R. A." for Punch, Thackeray concocts a mock catalogue entry for an "Academy Exhibition" of English painting:

1311. The Duke of Wellington and the Shrimp [Napoleon] (Seringapatam, early Saurin).

And can it be, thou hideous imp,
That life is ah! how brief, and glory but a shrimp!
We must protest against the Duke's likeness here;
for though his grace is short, his face is not an emerald-green colour; and it is his coat, not his boots, which are [sic] vermillion; nor is it fair to make the shrimp (a blue one) taller than the conqueror of Assaye; with this trifling difference of opinion, we are bound to express our highest admiration of this work. (quoted in Ray 351)

It would be a mistake to assume too close an identification between Dobbin and Wellington or Jos Sedley and Napoleon. To be sure, the connections are there, but they are suggestive rather than narrowly symbolic. If we know that Thackeray deplored hero-worship, then we can see how he could simultaneously admire Wellington as a direct and honest man and the enemy of all claptrap without succumbing to the superficial trappings of his position as the nation's hero. What Thackeray satirizes in Punch is not Wellington himself, but the illusions that are spun around him, the false appearances that replace the true. Dobbin's honesty consists of living not as an image but as a man, and his gentle manliness becomes, as Shirley Letwin puts it, "a species of courage" (204).

The Gentle Hero at Home

In his "Novel Without a Hero" Thackeray detaches virtue from the conventional hero and reconstructs his definition of the moral man. Rather than seeing Dobbin as an oaf and a fool, as most of the other characters in the novel do--significantly, it is Becky who admits that he is the only man who is a match for her--we need to recognize the moral alternative he represents. Philip Mason says that Dobbin could never be a true hero because he lacks style

(14). "The true hero," Mason says, "has...the air and manner of a gentleman--style and elegance," though he "must have solid qualities too. He must have warmth; he must be faithful and enduring in love; he must have staying power" (78). Dobbin is obviously faithful, loving, and loyal. Mason may reject him as a hero because he is not a perfect gentleman, but Thackeray's point is precisely that what the world takes for a perfect gentleman or a consummate hero is often a chimera, while real virtue is a matter not of elegance but of love.

Thackeray takes great pains to show that style--ton, surface elegance, call it what you will--is a most inadequate basis for the judgment of character. Near the end of the novel, when Amelia and Dobbin are at last beginning to draw near to each other, the narrator describes Dobbin as the only gentleman (ie., gentle hero) "this poor lady" had ever known.

Which of us can point out many such in his circle--men whose aims are generous, whose truth is constant, and not only constant in its kind, but elevated in its degree; whose want of meanness makes them simple: who can look the world honestly in the face with an equal manly sympathy for the great and the small? We all know a hundred whose coats are very well made, and a score who have excellent manners, and one or two happy beings who are what they call, in the inner circles, and have shot into the very centre and bull's eye of the fashion; but of gentlemen how many? Let us take a little scrap of paper and each make out his list.

My friend the Major [Dobbin earns his majority at Waterloo] I write, without any doubt, in mine.

He had very long legs, a yellow face, and a slight lisp, which at first was rather ridiculous. But his thoughts were just, his brains were fairly good, his life was honest and pure, and his heart warm and humble. He certainly had very large hands and feet, which the two George Osbornes used to caricature and laugh at; and their jeers and laughter perhaps led poor little Emmy astray as to his worth. But have we not all been misled about our heroes, and changed our opinions a hundred times? (VF 601-602)

U. C. Knoepfelmacher seems not to have read this passage, for he says that "Dobbin is not at all endorsed by the narrator" (54). Further, he says that Thackeray "refuses to judge the characters for us and, what is more, denies us the means by which we can ourselves arrive at a complete and unequivocal judgment" (64). Nothing could be further from the truth. We are given ample evidence of Dobbin's virtue, even if it is not absolutely "unequivocal." Dobbin may be a mixture of attractive and unattractive qualities; he may even be unwise in loving Amelia, but he is good. He never, consciously or unconsciously, does a mean thing, and the harm he does is a result of trying only too hard to bring happiness to others. To say that Thackeray, directly or indirectly, withholds judgment of Dobbin or obscures the basis on which he is to be judged is to ignore the whole texture of Dobbin's life as Thackeray describes it.

Dobbin even has a few surprises in him. After long years of devotion and fidelity to Amelia, he finally admits

to himself how perverse she has been to revere a brazen hero and how inadequate to his conception of her she really is. It is a triumphant awakening; the reader wants to stamp his feet and cheer when Dobbin at last lays it all out. But it is sad too, for the end of the illusion is also the end of a certain kind of joy. Driven to speak the truth at last, Dobbin tells Amelia,

I know what your heart is capable of: it can cling faithfully to a recollection, and cherish a fancy; but it can't feel such an attachment as mine deserves to mate with and such as I would have won from a woman more generous than you. I knew all along the prize I had set my life on was not worth winning; that I was a fool, with fond fancies, too, bartering away my all of truth and ardour against your little feeble remnant of love. I will bargain no more; I withdraw. I find no fault with you. You are very good-natured, and have done your best; but you couldn't--you couldn't reach up to the height of the attachment which I bore you, and which a loftier soul than yours might have been proud to share. Good-bye, Amelia! I have watched you struggle. Let it end. We are both weary of it. (VF 647)

The gentle hero, then, is ultimately a realist, as honest in his perceptions and moral judgments as he is in his personal behavior. Dobbin's disappointment seems painfully like that of Thackeray when Jane Brookfield finally, after much soul-searching on both sides, told him not to write or call on her anymore. Going through a bunch of her letters, he couldn't help showing his bitterness. "I was packing away yesterday the letters of years. These didn't make me cry. They made me laugh

as I knew they would. It was for this that I gave my heart away" (Letters IV, 431). In Vanity Fair the narrator says,

Perhaps in Vanity Fair there are no better satires than letters. Take a bundle of your dear friend's of two years back--your dear friend whom you hate now. Look at a file of your sister's; how you clung to each other till you quarrelled about the twenty pound legacy. Get down the round-hand scrawls of your son who has half broken your heart with selfish undutifulness since; or a parcel of your own, breathing endless ardour and love eternal, which were sent back by your mistress when she married the Nabob--your mistress for whom you now care no more than for Queen Elizabeth. Vows, love, promises, confidences, gratitude, how queerly they read after a while! There ought to be a law in Vanity Fair ordering the destruction of every written document...after a certain and proper interval. (VF 182)

Perhaps Thackeray might have agreed with Swift's narrator in A Tale of a Tub that happiness is "the perpetual possession of being well deceived" (Ray 425), for when Dobbin finally acknowledges the truth about Amelia, his belief in happiness wanes. But there was also a lightness of spirit in Thackeray, and his ability to love was not quenched by his disappointment with Jane, though he never found anyone to replace her. The man who had laughed bitterly over the letters from the woman he had loved was the same man who could write, "It is best to love wisely, no doubt; but to love foolishly is better than not to be able to love at all" (Pendennis, Monsarrat 237), anticipating both Tennyson's "In Memoriam" and Dobbin's lifelong fidelity.

The ethos of the gentle hero is shaped, in part, by his loss of the woman he loves, or in Dobbin's case the diminishment of love itself. When Dobbin finally wins Amelia, the sweetness of his reward is sadly compromised by its tardiness.

It was gone indeed. William had spent it all out. He loved her no more, he thought, as he had loved her. He never could again. That sort of regard, which he had proffered to her for so many faithful years, can't be flung down and shattered, and mended so as to show no scars. The little heedless tyrant had so destroyed it. No, William thought again and again, 'It was myself I deluded, and persisted in cajoling; had she been worthy of the love I gave her, she would have returned it long ago. It was a fond mistake. Isn't the whole course of life made up of such?' (VF 655)

Though Dobbin and Amelia do eventually marry, Thackeray never indicates that the old feeling Dobbin had for her ever fully returns. There are in life some things for which too long a wait can be ruin. If the mortgage on the ancestral home falls due, and there is no money in the bank to pay it on the appointed day, then the accumulation of a fortune afterwards, though it buy another house nearly as fine, will not serve. Perhaps a heart, once broken, can never truly be mended, but as Thackeray's gentle hero learns, it is possible to live with half a heart, and no one need ever know.

In a writer like Henry James a loss like Dobbin's is seen as a positive renunciation--not Thackeray's view.

After what Dobbin thinks is his final break with Amelia, he determines to devote himself to "duty," just as any good Jamesian hero or heroine would do. But Dobbin's duty consists of "see[ing] that the buttons of the recruits are properly bright, and that the serjeants make no mistakes in their accounts" (VF 655). Thackeray makes no bones about the fact that he sees this substitution of duty for love as a trivialization of possibility. James's Isabelle Archer, on the other hand, makes essentially the same choice and is presented as a moral heroine.

James's stringent world view does not encompass our gentle hero--that alone is enough to demonstrate his particularly English nature--for such a hero does not renounce love, or life. He wants his happiness more deeply, perhaps, than most. The subtlety of his response is characteristic: there is no leaping over the parapets, no clattering carriage ride through a darkened landscape. Unless the reader of a book like Vanity Fair is especially attentive, he might miss altogether the shudder in the frame, the swallowed sigh. There is in the gentle hero more acceptance than resignation; more importantly, there is no sense of martyrdom. The reader may miss the shift in consciousness when the gentle hero makes his bid, fails, knows it, and moves ahead. The other characters are not likely to recognize what has happened--quite the contrary.

At a lively party it takes a sensitive observer to notice that the real drama in the scene may be going on in the heart of the tired man standing in the corner. But careful reading reveals that in English novels throughout the nineteenth century the character of the gentle hero is a recurrent one, his moral stature a quiet, but persistent, reminder that ordinary lives contain scope enough for ethical and emotional heroism.

Knoepfmacher says that Dobbin's love for Amelia is perverse, that "it is his single vanity" (70). But Knoepfmacher misses the point of Vanity Fair, which is that all of us live in a world of illusions. Some are harmful and some are not, but most are a mixture of good and bad. Someone once said, "There are some truths by which we cannot live." It is for each of us to find those illusions which make our existence possible. Becky's illusion is that she deserves riches without effort, adoration without reciprocal generosity. Jos's illusion is that he is a fine fellow who can always leave his failures behind him. But Dobbin has no illusions about himself, and it is a far less grievous error than the others' that his love for Amelia blinds him for so long. He may be imperfect and for too long imperceptive, but in his gentle way he is heroic.

But perhaps what appear to be profound differences among the various characters are, in fact, differences of degree rather than of kind. Virtue and vice are not discrete absolutes. The job of the moralist is to point to the spot along the continuum between the two where one becomes the other. Because there are so many variables--perception, motivation, understanding, innate limitation, external circumstance--pinpointing that moral fulcrum can be very difficult. Thackeray saw the difficulty only too well; it is the root source of his rich and complex irony.

One of the most obvious ironies in Vanity Fair is the casting of Dobbin as its real hero. By definition, the traditional hero is all but perfect, with just enough idiosyncrasy to render him human. This slippage from perfection amounts to creating a hero from the top down. As soon as he begins to appear recognizably human, the slippage stops, leaving the character--Oedipus, Macbeth, Lancelot, the Count of Monte Cristo--in a still-exalted state. But gentle Dobbin is a hero built from the bottom up. He begins in a very lowly state indeed and gradually rises to a kind of modest domestic perfection. He is not a monster of virtue who must be brought low; he is, rather, a man constructed of the humblest materials who manages to achieve something fairly unremarkable: a satisfactory

marriage and an adequately happy life. For a man who had wanted more, perhaps it is not so much. Endless waves of passion and a lifetime of breasting the ramparts might have left him exhilarated on life's far shore, but in a world where so much can so easily go wrong, Dobbin does well enough. And if, as Thackeray regretfully suggests, his life is not untarnished satisfaction, it does have its compensations. Just as Thackeray's daughters became the companions he might have wanted a wife to be, so too Dobbin's daughter lights up the corner of his heart that Amelia had failed to illuminate.

Knoepfmacher says that "The union of Dobbin and Amelia is not a triumph. It merely mitigates Dobbin's misery and chastens Amelia's self-love....The marriage is belated," according to Knoepfmacher, for "The matron who now becomes Dobbin's wife is but a shade of the vision to which he had clung over the years" (77). Does this mean that if Dobbin had married Amelia in George's place, he would never have noticed her growing older? Does this mean that a middle-aged woman is an unworthy object of love? Dobbin's victory is not his achievement--of success, of love, of wealth, of virtue--though he achieves a measure of all four. His victory is nothing more than what he began with: the capacity to love and an instinctive compassion that binds him to the social world he lives in.

"Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?" (VF 666).

Vanity Fair is not a novel about success. Nor is it a novel about failure. It is a novel about making the best of things--a specialty of the gentle hero--and recognizing that, while there are in this life no final happy endings, there is room for pleasure, laughter, and hope that the future will at least not be any worse. It is a novel that is rhetorically honest, that values reason and attempts to get at the truth in human beings that often lies hidden beneath layers of deception, vanity, or plain foolishness. When the narrator tells us he met Amelia and Dobbin on a tour in Pumpernickel, he assures us that theirs is a "history of which every word is true" (VF 602). In the sense of human truth, it is--absolutely.

Dobbin is in many ways the archetypal gentle hero, just as Ivanhoe is the traditional hero or Mr. Knightly is the gentleman. As a character type the gentle hero deserves a category that is discrete and well-defined, for he is as much a stereotype as the femme fatale or the ancient sage. This is not to say that the gentle hero is the same in every work in which he appears--he can be as individualized as his creator wishes to make him--but in all his manifestations he is shaped according to social

principles and moral values that are, if not universal, ubiquitous in English fiction.

Of all the gentle heroes in Victorian literature Dobbin provides perhaps the most complete example of the type. But he does not stand alone: his shyness, his less-than-perfect physical attributes, his abiding love and generosity are all characteristics he shares with Eliot's Seth Bede and Dickens's Mr. Jarndyce. The following chapters will examine these two additional gentle heroes in an effort to arrive at a complete definition of the type and to explore how other Victorian writers incorporate him into their fiction.

CHAPTER III

THE GENTLE HERO IN GEORGE ELIOT'S ADAM BEDE

Introduction

Like William Thackeray in Vanity Fair, George Eliot strives in Adam Bede to undercut the traditional heroic ideal in service of a fictional realism that offers characters with the lineaments of living people and a gentle hero who is far from olympian. Thackeray's gentle hero Dobbin grows out of the author's response to the relations between men and women, with an emphasis on chivalry and manly self-sacrifice. Eliot's gentle hero, Seth Bede, is also connected to women (his mother and Dinah Morris primarily) and lives to serve them, but the background for Eliot's gentle hero does not echo the romantic tradition of chivalry and courtly love that we associate with Thackeray.

Rather, Eliot's gentle hero exemplifies her belief in a philosophical alternative to Christianity, whose exponents are the skeptical Biblical scholar David Friedrich Strauss and August Comte, John Stuart Mill, and Ludwig Feuerbach--all more or less positivist philosophers.

Especially important to Eliot's development of the gentle hero is Feuerbach's religion of humanity, which maintains that the human and the divine are synonymous, that the foundation of human society is love, and that the tragedy of human life is the inevitable conflict between man's nature and cosmic law.

Adam Bede, like Eliot's other fiction, demonstrates that in our relations with others our acts have irremediable consequences, which follow from the interaction of fate and free will. The gentle hero represents the best possible human type for a tragically flawed world, not by challenging or defying the cosmos, as a traditional hero might do, but by learning compassion through suffering and living for others. The gentle hero triumphs by dint of his less than completely heroic nature in a world where altruism and human solidarity ameliorate the effects of man's inevitably tragic fate.

Despite the extensive treatment Eliot gives to Seth Bede, Adam Bede's brother, especially at the beginning and at the end of the novel, very few (if any) critics have paid much attention to his character at all. This is remarkable, for Seth is, if not Eliot's only spokesman, certainly the novel's prime example of how one should go about living as a moral human being. His portrait is profoundly "realistic," in the sense that he is an ordinary

man with no pretensions to grandeur, who nevertheless manages to maintain an unshakable moral integrity. He may easily be overlooked, if all we consider are the plot and the development of the major characters, but without Seth Bede Adam Bede would be a far different book morally.

In many ways Adam Bede is not a novel primarily about a particular character's moral growth. Rather it presents a whole social world, in which characters exist mainly in their relations with others. Of course, the same could be said of many, if not most, English novels, but in Adam Bede the social fabric is paramount in a way that in Clarissa, for example, it is not. Adam Bede is essentially a novel about community and the individual's relation to it. It is not very productive, therefore, to consider Seth in isolation. As the gentle hero, Seth is very much a social being, and he represents only one of the several competing heroisms--authentic, flawed, and false--that George Eliot explores in a book that builds upon contrast as a major structural principle. Accordingly, Seth is best understood and his moral distinction best appreciated when his character and behavior are compared to those of the novel's other potential heroes: Adam, Arthur Donnithorne, Mr. Irwine, and perhaps even Dinah Morris.

This chapter will examine Eliot's intellectual background and its influence on the development of her

gentle hero, Seth Bede. Most important to this consideration are Ludwig Feuerbach and his religion of humanity and Eliot's belief in a law of consequences that arrives at a kind of determinism based, paradoxically, on free will. Eliot is far more "philosophical" than either Thackeray or Dickens, and she has a more schematic approach to experience, yet at the same time her fiction is patently more realistic. What saves Adam Bede from being a missionary tract or the expression of a doctrinaire code of behavior is her uncommon ability to extrapolate philosophical truth from lived experience. She truly understands how people feel, and she never lets her philosophy obscure her accurate, compassionate observation of human life. Her beliefs helped shape her fiction, but, as with Yeats, it is not for her systematic thought that she is remembered but for her extraordinary empathy and the grandeur of her moral vision.

Eliot's Fictional Realism and the Gentle Hero

Eliot's realism is in keeping with that of other English writers who have sought to hold a mirror up to Nature. Thackeray's mirror is cracked, revealing both the flaws in the society he observes and the novelist's own limitations. Eliot's mirror is likewise imperfect.

The narrator of Adam Bede says,

I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective [less for Eliot than for most of us]; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath. (AB 221)

It is the novelist's duty, she tells us, to follow "nature and fact" and not to "represent things as they never have been and never will be" (AB 221). Traditional heroes inevitably have the aura of unreality about them, and Eliot reminds the reader again and again of the make-believe quality of the conventionally heroic ideal.

Although no critic that I am aware of has noted the importance of Eliot's gentle hero, at least one sees her response to traditional heroism as problematic. Calvin Bedient has observed, "That heroic aspiration might fail, that a noble sacrifice might be resisted, that the crowd is not at all eager to welcome, to adore, to understand the hero--this seems to strike George Eliot with the force of a blow" (85). Bedient misreads Eliot's attitude toward conventional heroism. If we can call full-blown worldly success a kind of heroic fulfillment, then this may be what initially motivates some of her best characters, but it is not what ultimately rewards them. While some gifted

potential heroes may have to settle for less--like Lydgate and Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch--other, simpler folk like those in Adam Bede often display "the most difficult heroism that...consists in the daily conquests of our private demons, not in the slaying of world-notorious dragons" (Eliot, Letters VI, 126). As Felicia Bonaparte notes, "life is an exercise in disappointment and failure, and our best efforts are often those which teach us that stoical resignation which Eliot had called... 'a hidden heroism'" (176). This resignation is the key to Eliot's philosophy and to the character of her gentle hero.

Bonaparte rightly points out Eliot's propensity for flattening her potentially heroic characters and elevating apparently humble ones. Kester Bale, the rick maker in Adam Bede, may be old, arthritic, and inarticulate, but his genius for making ricks endows him with an ambient heroism (AB 561-62). On the other hand, Dorothea Brooke is no Saint Theresa, Dinah Morris no Saint Catherine, though each is compared to the saint most like her. And even Hamlet, according to the narrator of The Mill on the Floss, might have met a less heroic destiny if he had weathered the storms of his youth:

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet's having married Ophelia, and gone through

life with a reputation for sanity, notwithstanding many soliloquies, and some moody sarcasms towards the fair daughter of Polonius, to say nothing of the frankest incivility to his father-in-law. (351)

Hamlet in old age would be no hero, but it is above all else the perspective from which we view a character that determines our judgment of him (Bonaparte 168). "[I]f you would maintain the slightest belief in human heroism, you must never make a pilgrimage to see a hero," says the narrator of Adam Bede. The way to find the lovableness of human nature, the "deep pathos," and the "sublime mysteries" of humanity is "by living a great deal among people more or less commonplace and vulgar, of whom you would perhaps hear nothing very surprising if you were to inquire about them in the neighborhood where they dwelt" (AB 229). There could not be a more incisive description of the commonplace human community that nourishes the gentle hero.

Early in the novel the narrator cautions us not to entertain "very erroneous theories and very sublime feelings," for they may blind us to the qualities of gentle heroism inherent in ordinary men. "[W]e can hardly think Dinah and Seth beneath our sympathy, accustomed as we may be to weep over the loftier sorrows of heroines in satin boots and crinoline, and of heroes riding fiery horses, themselves ridden by still more fiery passions" (AB 82).

It is the "fiery passions" of the traditional hero that lead to "egoistic dissatisfaction" (Bedient 86), as we shall see in Arthur Donnithorne and Hetty Sorrel's doomed, if passionate, love affair. Love is all-important to Eliot, but it is the realistic, tempered love of gentle hero Seth Bede, not a Brontëesque whirlwind, which earns her praise.

In the famous Chapter 17 of Adam Bede Eliot delineates her theory of realism, a theory that turns on the question of the heroic dimensions of ordinary experience. It is truth to life that she seeks and that she finds "in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise." The narrator loves these paintings for the "delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence" (AB 223) and she "turn[s] without shrinking from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner..." (AB 223). Eliot admires Reubens for his "real, breathing men and women--men and women moved by passions [passions rooted in the common earth, we must assume]....the men such grand bearded grapplings fit to do the work of the world, the women such real mothers" (Letters II, 451). Reubens may be a more heroic painter than Eliot seems to think, but it is important to note her predilection for finding the ordinary in the extraordinary, for valuing the mundane above the monumental.

It follows then that her gentle hero is most at home in the ordinary world and does not need an exaggerated setting in which to act out his charities.

Adam Bede's realism is a paean to the rural life Eliot had known as a girl a few miles outside Coventry, where her father had won the respect of his employers for his management of their estates and where she had learned first-hand that ordinary men and women deserve our best attention. "There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my everyday fellow-men..." (AB 224).

Like many highly intelligent and sophisticated people, Eliot nourished an affection for her rural past and attributed to it moral values that are undoubtedly more developed than actual circumstances might warrant. We must remember that just because Eliot believes she is being "realistic" doesn't mean she always is. There is a kind of lyric quality about Adam Bede that often makes it read like a sort of pastoral idyll. Even so, it is the commonplace, the mundane, the rustic that she longs for, though that too may be a place that never was and never will be.

Part of the mundane world that she celebrates is the world of work. It is a truism that for George Eliot, as for many Victorians, the idea of work amounted to almost a religion. It is fitting, therefore, that we first meet our gentle hero in his workplace--both a "realistic" setting for Seth and Adam Bede and a quiet reminder, that will be important later on, that Christ was a carpenter as well. But Adam is described first, in rather larger-than-life terms, for he is, in fact, a traditionally heroic figure, despite his humble occupation. He is an indigenous Englishman, his ancestry tracing back to the Saxons and Celts. He is tall, strong, roughly handsome, and highly intelligent. His hair is "jet-black," his eyes dark and penetrating. The language used to describe him is muscular and vigorous and creates an image of physical strength and quick, practical intelligence.

Adam Bede is widely believed to be a portrait of Robert Evans, George Eliot's father, perhaps more as Eliot had wished him to be than as he actually was. Many of the stories by and about her father find their way into the novel--as does her Aunt Elizabeth's account of spending the night in prison with a young girl condemned to hang for child-murder. Adam is, like the traditional hero generally, almost a child's idea of a man, the same way a drawing of a square with four windows, a door, a chimney,

and a pointed roof is a child's idea of a house. It is as if the adoring daughter had created a paragon in her young mind, while the mature and reflective artist created a flawed ideal. For perfect as Adam seems, he is in fact too rigid, too judgmental (even when right), too proud to be a gentle hero. He admits this himself when he says, "Ah, I was always too hard....It's a sore fault in me as I'm so hot and out o' patience with people when they do wrong....I see clear enough there's more pride nor love in my soul....the real tough job for me 'ud be to master my own will and temper, and go right against my own pride" (AB 247). His male anger must be tempered into compassion in order for him to be made whole. He does not function as a gentle hero in the novel because his temper is too quick, his relations with women too problematic. He will learn and grow from his experience, while Seth, the gentle hero, will suffer and stoically endure.

Unlike the more colorful Adam, Seth is an "everyday fellowman." In him the same genetic endowment takes a milder form; indeed, even his name has a sibilant softness. "Seth's broad shoulders have a slight stoop; his eyes are grey; his eyebrows have less prominence and more repose than his brother's, and his glance, instead of being keen, is confiding and benignant" (AB 50). Also interesting is the fact that the shape of his head is visible beneath

his thin hair. The phrenologist Charles Bray, who was so important to the young George Eliot, had once read the bumps on her head--and come up with a wildly deceptive profile of her character. Seth's "predominant coronal arch," the top front of the skull, is a more accurate indicator of his character. According to the phrenologists, the coronal arch is the site of benevolence (Gregory 620)--a characteristic virtue of the gentle hero, and this Seth has in abundance.

At any rate, Seth is presented as a more "realistic" character than Adam. He is not a perfect craftsman like his brother, and there is some good-natured banter among the other carpenters at Seth's expense when he fails to complete the delicate finish work on a door. This failure of craftsmanship might be considered damning in an Eliot novel, for she believed in work with an almost religious intensity. Seth's failure is a serious flaw but not an unforgivable one, especially in a novel where even child-murder is forgiven. He may not be Loamshire's best carpenter, but the energy he fails to expend in work he spends in love, not in selfish pursuits. Eliot's point is that though Adam seems to be the perfect older brother with his good looks and physical strength, his energies go almost wholly into his work, at the expense of his relations with other people, while the gentle hero Seth

is the more human and in the end the more instinctively moral of the two.

Roused to Seth's defense, Adam nearly precipitates a fight with Wiry Ben. Seth, ever the peacemaker, defuses the situation: "'Let be, Addy, let be. Ben will be joking. Why, he's i' the right to laugh at me - I canna help laughing at myself'" (AB 51). A self-deprecatory sense of humor is often one of the hallmarks of the gentle hero. While Adam compels respect--ours and the other characters'--Seth calls forth a comradely affection. "'Come, Ben, lad,' said Seth in a persuasive tone, 'don't let's have a quarrel about it. You know Adam will have his way. You may 's well try to turn a waggon in a narrow lane'" (AB 51). It is not Adam's stubbornness and threats that do the trick, but Seth's conciliation. "'I binna frightened at Adam,' said Ben, 'but I donna mind sayin' as I'll let 't alone at yare askin', Seth'" (AB 52).

In addition, as a gentle hero, Seth is much less self-involved than Adam, who seems always to be brooding about something or other: his father's drunkenness and sloth, his rather picturesque love for Hetty, the future of the Donnithorne woods. Seth, on the other hand, is more readily connected to others. "The idle tramps always felt sure they could get a copper from Seth; they scarcely ever spoke to Adam" (AB 50). And at their father's funeral

it is Seth, not Adam, who weeps. "Seth, who was easily touched, shed tears," and finds solace in the psalm the mourners are singing. Adam, however, is at this crucial moment of grief unable for the first time in his life to join in the singing, nor is he sensitive to his mother's stated wish to die. "Adam never took notice of his mother's little unjust complaints; but Seth said, 'Nay, mother, thee mustna say so. Thy sons 'ull never get another mother'" (AB 246, 248).

Not only does Eliot present the internal dynamics of family life in immediately realistic terms, she also considers the family in its social and historical context. According to Suzanne Graver, village life in England from the Anglo-Saxon to the post-medieval periods had been shaped by communal rather than individualist values. But by the last half of the eighteenth century the rise of industrial urban communities, increased egalitarianism, and religious dissent had led to a greater concern with the individual and a lessened approbation of the monolithic community (1). These changes brought with them considerable unease, and it was inevitable that many should look for comfort to what seemed in retrospect a more tranquil past.

Richard Altick notes, however, that the byword for many Victorians was new, and that the word modern as a "label of recommendation" seems, according to Dwight Culler,

"to have entered the language in the first third of the nineteenth-century" (Altick 11). But in order to achieve a realism that would not date as quickly as yesterday's headlines or last year's fashions, Eliot, Thackeray, and Dickens (though not Trollope) set many of their novels in the past in order to hold onto those moral values and human truths that do not go out of date. The timeliness of these retrospective books was, according to Altick, "renewed at each recurrence; the history of the century, viewed in long enough perspective, seemed to possess an elemental rhythm" (138). Adam Bede amounts to a pastoral novel, with its natural rhythms and seasonal celebrations. It embodies the timeless realism of elemental nature and ordinary human life in its simplest social context and demonstrates the importance of the gentle hero in maintaining sympathetic, humanistic values in the face of disruptive, even convulsive, social change.

The narrator of Adam Bede is clear about what "modern" life has paid for progress:

Leisure is gone--gone where the spinning-wheels are gone, and the pack-horses, and the slow waggon, and the pedlars who brought bargains to the door on sunny afternoons. Ingenious philosophers tell you, perhaps, that the great work of the steam-engine is to create leisure for mankind. Do not believe them; it only creates a vacuum for eager thought to rush in. Even idleness is eager now--eager for amusement; prone to excursion trains, art-museums, periodical literature, and exciting novels: prone even to scientific theorising, and cursory peeps through

microscopes. [All of this, of course, is aimed at herself and Lewes as much as at anyone.] Old Leisure was quite a different personage....(AB 557)

Leisure implies a lack of aggression and drive; it is a seemingly unheroic ideal. It implies, too, a contradiction to a view of the past as the playground of heroes, but in a novel of such complexity and subtlety as Adam Bede such ironies should not disturb us. Eliot is not naive about the claims of the past. Clearly, she cherishes the agrarian values of her childhood and finds life's greatest significance in the individual's ties to his community, but the past she reveres is that of her parents and grandparents, not a past transformed by reconstructed heroism. In Adam Bede it is pointedly not Seth, our gentle hero, who is associated with a heroic golden age, but Arthur Donnithorne, the closest thing the novel has to a villain, and the contrast between these two characters--and of both with Adam--is central to the book's form and moral import.

Arthur Donnithorne's Failure as a Traditional Hero and Member of the Community

Poor simple Hetty falls in love with Arthur, a young and dashing future Loamshire squire, whose identification with superficial heroic accoutrements helps show his unreliability. He is neither gentle nor truly heroic until

the novel's end, when like Adam he learns what is important and what his own responsibilities are. Only in a pastoral idyll, an unreal fantasy far from the common Loamshire earth, could Arthur and Hetty embrace without cost; Eliot knows that Hayslope is not a bower of bliss protected from real-life intrusions. "Poor things! It was a pity they were not in that golden age of childhood when they would have stood face to face, eyeing each other with timid liking, then given each other a little butterfly kiss, and toddled off together" (AB 175-76). In a make-believe world it might be possible for "Such young unfurrowed souls [to] roll to meet each other like two velvet peaches that touch softly and are at rest" (AB 177). But Hetty is a dairymaid, not a wood nymph, and in the real world innocence is liable to be ruined by false gods: "It was as if she had been wooed by a river-god, who might at any time take her to his wondrous halls below a watery heaven" (181). Arthur is an important contrast to Seth, for he represents the traditional hero--with all of his charm and most of his shortcomings. Perhaps it is stretching the point to call an Arcadian shepherd a hero, but it's not stretching it far. More often than not, both belong to a dangerous world of unreality and sham. Arthur "may be a shepherd in Arcadia for aught he knows, he may be the first youth kissing the first maiden, he may be Eros himself, sipping

the lips of Psyche--it is all one" (AB 182). Hetty and Arthur may find bliss in the woods, but judgment has fled with a kiss, and their gilded view of themselves fades quickly when brought before the eyes of the community.

Arthur, who is repeatedly associated with traditionally heroic conventions, seeks to elude the claims his community places upon him and to turn his back on his personal and social obligations for the sake of his own pleasure and gratification. If Adam is too hot-tempered and prideful to be a gentle hero, Arthur is too selfish, handsome and charming though he may be. Like a traditional hero, Arthur takes what he wants from Hetty. In contrast, the gentle hero Seth waits and hopes for Dinah Morris to return his love. This signal difference in ways of loving is crucial to the novel's theme of love and redemption through suffering and to the character of the gentle hero.

George Eliot is, of course, deeply concerned with community and man's relation to his immediate social world, not as a return to some remote playground of the gods, where the gentle hero is impossible, but as an expression of the on-going, mutual interdependence of individual men and women. The traditional hero may have reflected cultural values that were communally held, but he does not provide a valuable model for ordinary men who simply want to live decently. The traditional hero reflects his culture without

necessarily being an integral part of it. He reflects instead an idealized version of it--a distillation and concentration of it--ultimately, therefore, its distortion and even betrayal. There is a necessary gap between the heroic and the mundane, and it is in this gap that the gentle hero quietly lives, for he is both less magnificent than the traditional hero and more moral than the common herd.

Again and again, Eliot associates Arthur with the idea of the hero, but always by way of showing how unheroic he really is. Significantly, she never undercuts Seth in this way. Arthur, home from his regiment with an injured arm, admires himself in his mirror (rather like Vanity Fair's Jos Sedley) while preparing to go on a fishing expedition. In high spirits, he breaks into "his favorite song from the 'Beggar's Opera,' 'When the heart of a man is oppressed with care.' Not an heroic strain; nevertheless Arthur felt himself very heroic as he strode towards the stables to give his orders about the horses" (AB 168). Of course, the "hero" of The Beggar's Opera is a blackguard and sexual libertine who betrays his friends and lovers and ends on the gallows. In contrast, poor Seth, when he sings at all, sings hymns and longs for the icy Dinah; Arthur's song is the immediate prelude to his first meeting

with Hetty in the wood, and it neatly foreshadows both Arthur's weakness and Hetty's tragedy.

Again, we see Arthur's association with the putatively heroic at the scene of his twenty-first birthday celebration, which seems almost diagrammatic in its placing of the social strata of Hayslope. Yet it is not social class that Eliot means to challenge. In many ways Eliot is a traditionalist; it would be a mistake to read her treatment of Arthur Donnithorne as an indictment of the aristocracy. But in his role as "hero" he is certainly culpable. Manifestly, he would like to see himself as a hero to his tenants, an ambition abetted by Mr. Irwine, the vicar, who, during the festivities, "satisfied himself with standing still, and nodding at a distance, that no one's attention might be disturbed from the young Squire, the hero of the day" (AB 316). Making his way among the women and children, Arthur understandably shows Hetty no special favor, for she is far beneath him socially. To single her out would cause comment. But his avoidance of her causes her great distress:

Hetty thought this was going to be the most miserable day she had had for a long while: a moment of chill day light and reality came across her dream: Arthur, who has seemed so near to her only a few hours before [when they were sequestered in the forest], was separated from her, as the hero of a great procession is separated from a small outsider in the crowd (AB 316) (*italics mine*).

When he plays the hero to Hetty or to his tenants, Arthur distances himself from the community--a worse fault in Eliot's books than even Seth's botched carpentry. The scene is rich with irony. The birthday feast is indeed a communal event; everyone in Loamshire attends, from the formidable Mrs. Irwine to the feeble-minded field hand. The modest Seth is present too, a silent contrast to the young squire, for within this community there is a fatal division, a secret estrangement that subverts communal ties of obligation and accountability. Because Hetty sees Arthur as her hero, and because Arthur sees himself that way too, they exempt themselves from the riches and responsibilities of ordinary life and wager their futures for fool's gold. It is in his guise as hero that Arthur commits his sins; only after he endures exile, illness, and the destruction of his illusions is he permitted to return to the community as an accepted member. In contrast, the novel's gentle hero, Seth, is first to last a member of his community; indeed, he may seem almost at times to merge with it, yet he is not without a personality and a will.

It is not the world of enchantment, Arthur's world, where the community's moral bedrock lies. In fact, Arthur is but one of a line of failed traditional heroes who have squandered their right to the respect of their tenants.

The connections between the Donnithornes' "heroism" and their hubris are merely suggested, but the implications are telling. The old squire, Arthur's grandfather, mismanages his estates and is grossly inconsiderate of his tenants. We are delighted when Mrs. Poyser eventually "has her say out" and voices her many complaints against him. Even the great house itself is described with implicit moral condescension: "It was one of those entrance halls which make the surrounding rooms look like closets, with stucco angels, trumpets and flower-wreaths on the lofty ceiling, and great medallions of miscellaneous heroes on the walls, alternating with statues in niches" (AB 325) (*italics mine*).

Seth Bede and the Communal Ideal

Eliot believed, perhaps even more fervently than most Victorians, in the moral dimensions of work, something the gentle hero seldom shirks. Her characters are invariably defined by what they do, and we are invited to respect them insofar as they do the work they were born to and do it well. The old squire, far from being a productive member of his community, is well on the way to ruining his lands, while Arthur, who eagerly awaits his chance to improve things, is not engaged in any

productive activity during the time of his seduction of Hetty.

Seth, however, works alongside Adam in Johathan Burge's workshop. His less-than-perfect workmanship is like Dobbin's social awkwardness. Both may be unfortunate, but they are human lapses, not fatal flaws. Seth is not the extraordinary carpenter Adam is, but he is respected by the men he works with, and in an Eliot novel that counts for a lot. His awareness of his own limitations also prevents his being as vain about his abilities as Adam is of his. And of all the major characters --with the possible exception of the Poyzers--he is the one most integrated into the Hayslope community. Dinah leaves Stoniton and comes to Hayslope and marriage reluctantly and late; Hetty, of course, leaves Loamshire under tragic circumstances; Adam has "run away" once before and considers leaving again; Bartle Massey, the schoolmaster, is an outsider with a questionable past; the Poyzers are threatened with exile; and Arthur has been away in the army. Only Seth is in no danger of leaving, now or ever. He has bought himself out of the army and clings to the place and the people he loves. He is faithful in every sense of the word, a communal fixture and an irreducibly social being.

When Mr. Casson remarks that Seth is "lookin' rether too high" in courting Dinah, Wiry Ben points out that the Poyzers, Dinah's relations, seem to be awfully fond of Adam, "mere" carpenter that he is. Alluding to Adam's apparent superiority, Mr. Joshua Rann expostulates: "Adam an' Seth's two men; you wunna fit them two wi' the same last."

'Maybe,' said Wiry Ben, contemptuously, 'but Seth's the lad for me, though he was a Methody twice o'er. I'm fair beat wi' Seth, for I've been teazin' him iver sin' we've been workin' together, an' he bears me no more malice nor a lamb. An' he's a stout-hearted feller too, for when we saw the old tree all a-fire, a-comin' across the fields one night, an' we thought as it was a boguy, Seth made no more ado, but he up to 't as bold as a constable.' (AB 66)

Whether the tree was set alight by lightning or spirits, Seth shows that he has courage to go with his good nature and the approbation of his more sensible friends. The gentle hero is not a milksop, though he may sometimes seem to be, and this act of bravery in the face of a seemingly magical conflagration does more to enhance his character than Adam's belligerence in the workshop does to enhance his.

It might seem that it is Adam and Arthur who are paired as contrasting characters, just as Dinah and Hetty are. To be sure, they are rivals for Hetty's affections, but as characters they are often more alike than different.

Both need desperately to learn the moral lessons that Seth already knows, and both grow into greater moral awareness over the course of the novel. The real opposite to both Arthur and Adam is Seth--humble, self-effacing, and kind. We shall see how Seth, Adam Bede's gentle hero, is the real moral standard in Eliot's novel, against which all the other characters are in some way measured. It is not by virtue of his superiority to other men that he is our moral touchstone. Rather, it is his common decency, his ordinary goodness, that makes him Eliot's gentle hero. The real exemplar of moral heroism in Adam Bede is not the most dramatic character or the most attractive. His heroism is not the sort to inspire awe among the low, but to encourage emulation among the ordinary. He is at peace with his family and at ease with his community, and as real as Eliot can make him.

Feuerbach's Religion of Humanity as a Source for
Eliot's Gentle Hero, Seth Bede

According to biographer Gordon Haight, the novels of George Eliot are notable for their "psychological analysis" and "profound concern with religion" (8-9), qualities that date back to her introspective girlhood, when she gradually let go of the evangelical christianity she was exposed to at school and embraced a more heterodox

view of religion. As a young woman, she read Charles Hennell's An Inquiry into the Origins of Christianity and Charles Bray's The Philosophy of Necessity; or, the Law of Consequences as Applicable to Mental, Moral, and Social Science (Haight 38, 40). These intellectual unbelievers encouraged Eliot's rejection of orthodox christianity and were instrumental in the formation of her mature world view. Although her books are much more than the products of a perhaps quirky reading of christian theology, an understanding of the ideas that influenced her is essential to an understanding of her gentle hero Seth Bede.

A great deal has been written about Eliot's agnosticism, in particular about her intellectual debt to the Biblical scholars Strauss and Feuerbach, and it would be redundant to go over that ground in detail here, but it is impossible fully to understand Eliot's conception of the gentle hero without taking into account at least the essentials of Feuerbach's philosophy and its influence on her own religious development.

As a child, George Eliot practiced the strict evangelical faith she learned at school in Nuneaton--not the faith of her High-Church family. As a young woman, she rejected much of what she had believed earlier and built a new faith, based on both reason and feeling--to her the essential ingredients in any viable system of

belief. To say that George Eliot was an intelligent woman is an understatement. Intellectually, she could hold her own with the best minds of her age. What is especially appealing about Eliot, however, is not just her brilliance: she was already well-respected for her translations of German philosophers and her literary criticism before she began writing fiction in her thirties. What makes her work still live for readers today is not simply the logic and consistency of her thought but her appreciation for human feeling, in part expressed by the gentle hero. Even this emphasis on emotion owes something to others, for many of Eliot's deepest convictions are not original with her and belong very much to their time. Strauss's study of the historical Jesus, Das Leben Jesu, and Feuerbach's religion of humanity were crucial to the development of her ethical and religious beliefs, but her novels will be read for generations to come, while their works gather dust on scholars' shelves.

Eliot's gentle hero, in fact, derives in large measure from Feuerbach's religion of humanity, which put man in the place of God as an object of worship. Feuerbach argued that all religions were essentially religions of humanity, albeit called by other names. The human and the divine were one and the same, he believed; whatever man worshipped in God was in fact a projection of his own nature. The

result of this view was to sanctify all of life and to abolish any distinction between the natural and the supernatural (Paris 13). In her letters George Eliot writes that her novels have "for their main bearing" the conclusion that "the fellowship between man and man which has been the principle of development, social and moral, is not dependent on conceptions of what is not man; and that the idea of God...is the ideal of a goodness entirely human" (Letters VI 98). The gentle hero embodies this entirely human goodness and takes the place of God in Eliot's moral universe.

While Eliot rejects conventional christianity, she retains a good deal of the religious feeling associated with her past and uses traditional christian symbolism, not for its theological content but for its suggestive possibilities. The gentle hero is not strictly speaking a Christ figure, and Adam Bede is decidedly not a christian allegory. But Seth does evince Christlike qualities of suffering, sacrifice, and service, even though he does not expiate the sins of his community or stand apart from his fellows on holier ground. This is true of Reverend Irwine as well, who is a gentle hero too, though not so central to the moral action of the novel as Seth.

Mr. Irwine as a Feuerbachian Gentle Hero

Seth Bede, then, is not the only gentle hero in Eliot's novel; there is a second character--admittedly of less importance--whose life is also distinguished by gentleness and goodness. He is, of course, Mr. Irwine, the vicar, and he stands for religion in the community. It is to his parish church that everyone except a few of the Methodists goes. In him we see Eliot's compromise between the faith of her own father and the humanism of her adulthood. Like Seth, he is an "ordinary" man. Of him the narrator says, "[T]he existence of insignificant people has very important consequences in the world. It can be shown to...call forth many evil tempers from the selfish, and many heroisms from the sympathetic, and, in other ways, to play no small part in the tragedy of life" (AB 111). Because Mr. Irwine has a mother and two sickly sisters to look after, he has never married, though his robust manliness would have made him a splendid paterfamilias. Unlike Dinah, the Methodist preacher whose pieties threaten at times to overwhelm the reader, Mr. Irwine seldom talks about religion at all. Though a parson, he is something of a hedonist, like the card-playing Reverend Farebrother in Middlemarch, but morally there is no question of his soundness:

...his was one of those large-hearted, sweet-blooded natures that never know a narrow or a grudging thought; epicurean, if you will, with no enthusiasm [in the importunate Methodist fashion], no self-scourging sense of duty; but yet...of a sufficiently subtle moral fibre to have an unwearying tenderness for obscure and monotonous suffering....he held it no virtue to frown at irremediable faults (AB 111).

Mr. Irwine is a gentle hero whose function, like Seth Bede's, is to voice Eliot's judgment of the other characters and to augment the narrator's commentary and the novel's moral scheme.

Conciliatory and unaggressive, he lives a resolutely bachelor life, furthering the fortunes of his friends without thought for his own ends. He is important to the novel because he exemplifies in his own life Eliot's religious outlook--a sort of secularized christianity that retains the feeling of religion without emphasizing its supernaturalism. "If he had been in the habit of speaking theoretically, he would perhaps have said that the only healthy form religion could take...was that of certain dim but strong emotions, suffusing themselves as a hallowing influence over the family affections and neighbourly duties. He thought the custom of baptism more important than its doctrine" (AB 112)--in many ways a Feuerbachian and essentially Victorian attitude.

In a flash-forward, the narrator talks with the Adam of the future about the character of Mr. Irwine, in ways

that point up both Mr. Irwine's admirable qualities and Adam's achieved humanity. "Mr. Irwine didn't go into deep, speritial experience," says Adam. He

preached short moral sermons, and that was all. But then he acted pretty much up to what he said. I've seen pretty clear ever since I was a young un, as religion's something else besides doctrines and notions. I look at it as if the doctrines was like finding names for your feelings. (AB 227)

This is the mature Adam speaking; the young Adam would have pooh-poohed the very idea of feelings, except for his rather confused longings for Hetty. As a young man, Adam doesn't know where or how to feel. But by the time he reaches full maturity, marries, and fathers a family, he has learned that

it is more needful that my heart should swell with loving admiration at some trait of gentle goodness in the faulty people who sit at the same hearth with me, or in the clergyman of my own parish, who...is not an Oberlin or a Tillotson, than at the deeds of heroes whom I shall never know.... (AB 225)

In other words, he has learned to appreciate the kindly Mr. Irwine and his admirable qualities as a gentle hero.

The religion of humanity is based on human feeling, accessible to everyone through familial love--an emotion especially strong in the gentle hero.

I believe [says the narrator] there have been plenty of young heroes...who have felt quite sure they could never love anything more insignificant than a Diana, and yet have found themselves in middle life happily settled with a wife who waddles. (AB 224).

It is "the secret of deep human sympathy" that holds communities together and gives individual lives a "beauty..., which lies in no secret of proportion" (AB 224). Mr. Irwine, in his role as both clergyman and gentle hero, does much to hold his community together. Clearly, the figure of the gentle hero, be he Seth or Mr. Irwine, embodies in his very English way the human sympathy that is at the core of Feuerbach's philosophy. In contrast, it takes Adam Bede years to value and practice such communal feeling. In his youth Adam is like those young heroes who believe they can only love physical beauty. He must learn to love the moral qualities of a woman above all else, and to soften his harshness, as Seth instinctively does; "Seth, who could never abide anything harsh,...was always hoping for the best" (AB 228). Seth talks about his faith (though mercifully not so much as Dinah does), and he reads his Bible, but one gets the feeling that it is not religion that makes Seth good, but Seth who makes religion humane. The same could be said twice over of Mr. Irwine.

Significantly, as a priest, Mr. Irwine is responsible for the ritual observances of his church, as well as for

his pithy Sunday sermons. In The Essence of Christianity, Feuerbach re-examines christian ritual and belief according to the principles of his religion of humanity. Adam Bede reflects this re-examination and amounts to a fairly detailed presentation of Feuerbachian belief, a fact that has led some critics to attack the book for didacticism. According to U. C. Knoepfelmacher, Eliot relied heavily on Feuerbach's analysis of the sacraments in her treatment of the "supper-scenes" in Adam Bede. Feuerbach saw religious ritual as "merely a semi-conscious expression of man's veneration for the forces of nature" (Knoepfelmacher Question 81); Eliot uses the Harvest Supper near the end of the novel as a sort of ritual ceremony that unites the community in "sacred" purpose. But the novel succeeds, not because it rather schematically illustrates a particular belief system, but because it is centered in a convincing appraisal of human nature.

Ritual is important to the existence of a community, and the shared meal at the Harvest Supper is significant for its ritualistic implications. Knoepfelmacher is correct in seeing it as an anthropological rather than a religious account of communal observance--much as it might be in a Hardy novel--but it does reinforce the weight Eliot gives to the shared life. Seth and Mr. Irwine are inextricably bound to the village of Hayslope, though neither is a

transcendent being who confers meaning on experience. Instead, each is a part of common humanity, which must, in Eliot's and Feuerbach's scheme, create the meaning of experience for itself. Seth eschews the ritual of the Anglican church and joins what is to him the more appealing homeliness of the Methodists. Mr. Irwine continues to enact the rituals that give cohesiveness to much of English society. Seth is more humble, Mr. Irwine more sophisticated, but each represents the essential humanness that Eliot values as christianity's most important legacy.

Seth Bede as a Feuerbachian Christ-figure

Feuerbach sought to demystify christian theology by replacing sacred belief with secular explanation and seeing "God" as immanent in all creation. Spinoza, Wordsworth, and Carlyle had thought along the same lines, as had Huxley, Comte, and Mill. In fact, Eliot was far from alone in reading the universe as a place without a christian God. The collapse of faith has become a commonplace in accounting for the Victorian sensibility. But if the divine was not a separate quality from the human, it did not necessarily follow that the universe was without meaning or significance. Like Feuerbach, Eliot believed in the over-arching power of love, and the symbol of that love

was not God but Christ. Seth, the gentle carpenter who suffers in silence and serves others, is the most Christlike character in the novel and, at the same time, the most realistically human.

In his seminal essay on Eliot's religion of humanity, Bernard Paris explains that Feuerbach believed that the crux of Christianity is, in fact, secular humanism (24). Christianity, according to Feuerbach, "makes God become man, and then constitutes this God, not distinguished from man, having a human form, human feelings, and human thoughts, the object of its worship and veneration" (Essence xxxvi). It is not the law of God that shapes our lives, says Feuerbach, but the love of man for man that reflects the divine love embodied symbolically in Christ. "[L]ove is a higher power and truth than deity. Love conquers God" (Essence 53). In this view, human relationships based on love are the highest form of experience: "The relations of child and parent, of husband and wife, of brother and friend--in general, of man to man,--in short, all the moral relations are per se religious" (Essence 271). When Keats wrote of the "holiness of the heart's affections," he might have been anticipating Feuerbach and the gentle hero Seth Bede, whose relations with his mother, his brother, his friends, and finally with his brother's wife are close to sanctified. More than any other character in the novel,

gentle Seth is the embodiment of Feuerbachian love and Eliot's "divine" humanity.

In 1854, two years before she began writing fiction, Eliot wrote, "With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree" (Letters II, 153). And in 1855 she praised Tennyson's "In Memoriam" by saying that "the deepest significance of the poem is the sanctification of human love as a religion" (Belles Lettres 312). In her fiction Eliot captures the force, if not the phrasing, of Feuerbach's philosophy: in Feuerbach's words, "Love is God himself, and apart from it there is no God..., not a visionary, imaginary love--no! a real love, a love which has flesh and blood, which vibrates as an almighty force through all living" (Essence 47). The highest expression of this love, according to Feuerbach, is sexual love, and only marriages based on passion voluntarily shared are "true" marriages (Haight 138). One can see the appeal this would have had for the undoubtedly passionate George Eliot.

The gentle hero in Adam Bede is thus a kind of sexual Christ, for he expresses in the best way possible the "divine" nature of human love. Seth Bede is not a sacrificial Christ-figure, but he is Christlike, not just because he is religious but also because his every action is guided by love for others and because that love has

a strong sexual component. The sexual nature of his love for Dinah makes him more, not less, an embodiment of the highest form of human attachment. Though he never wins Dinah, Seth continues to serve her with the ardor of a courtly lover. As the gentle hero often does, he fails at love, but it is always important to remember that it is not some disembodied desire for martyrdom that shapes his action, but the very real--and ordinary--passion of a sensual human being.

Dinah, the object of Seth's love, like the Adam she eventually marries, seems better than she is. She spends her energies in Stoniton, preaching to the weary and indifferent, when the sunny meadows and cool dairy of her uncle's farm could be hers for the asking and where her practical help would be welcome. There is in her refusal of joy and the pleasure of ordinary work something that separates her from other people and makes her pious self-sacrifice seem like self-righteousness. She ministers to the needy, but always as a superior being, not as one who truly shares their plight or feelings. She looks to strangers in her ministry (like Mrs. Jellyby in Bleak House), quite failing to see that the reciprocal love she might find at home would be even more valuable than her one-sided philanthropy. She makes a great show of being moved by the suffering of others, but her pity has a rather

abstract quality. It is, in fact, Seth who really suffers, because his love for her is individual and personal rather than theological and theoretical. There is even something death-like about Dinah's sympathy; it lacks the pulse and breath of instinctive, sexual passion--at least until she is overcome by Adam.

When Dinah goes one night to comfort Hetty, whom Dinah believes to be in some obscure, mortal danger, she is "covered with her long white dress, her pale face full of subdued emotion, almost like a lovely corpse into which the soul has returned charged with sublimer secrets and a sublimer love" (AB 204) (*italics mine*). Sublime love is the stuff of legends, not of life. Dinah's sympathy is the dead product of doctrine and it lacks the heat and blood of life. It is a frigid sublimity, not gentleness, and the difference is crucial.

Significantly, Dinah preaches about the suffering of Christ: "Ah, how pale and worn he looks! He has gone through all that great agony in the garden, when his soul was exceeding sorrowful even unto death, and the great drops of sweat fell like blood to the ground" (AB 74). But there is nothing beyond her own pallor to indicate that she has ever experienced a gut-wrenching sorrow. Not until she allows herself to fall in love with Adam and to experience sexual feeling does she--quite

literally--feel the blood beating in her cheeks.

In one of her open-air sermons Dinah elaborates, despite her Methodism, upon the love of God in Feuerbachian terms: "we know everything comes from God....everything we have comes from God. And he gave us our souls, and put love between parents and children, and husband and wife. But is that as much as we want to know about God?" (AB 69). The culmination of God's love--and Dinah's sermon--is Jesus. Dinah describes in predictable terms the character of Jesus as a do-gooder among the poor, who "was full of love to all men." He cured the sick, worked miracles, and was kind to everybody--just what we'd expect. But then Dinah, like Feuerbach and Seth, like the gentle hero, turns back into the community itself: "Ah! wouldn't you love such a man if you saw him--if he was here in this village? What a kind heart he must have! What a friend he would be to go to in trouble! How pleasant it must be to be taught by him!" (AB 70). There is, in fact, just such a person in Hayslope, and his name is Seth Bede. And it so happens that he is in love with the lily-faced little Methodist preacher.

Seth declares himself one evening as he walks Dinah home after her preaching. "It's a deep mystery--the way the heart of man turns to one woman out of all the rest he's seen i' the world," he says. He promises he will

work seven years to win her, as Jacob did for Rachel. They serve the same master, he says, and he would do nothing to stand in the way of her ministry (AB 78). Significantly, when she marries Adam, she gives up preaching at her husband's request. Seth's emotion is evident: "His cheeks became flushed [with the heat of embarrassment and of sexual feeling]..., his mild gray eyes filled with tears, and his voice trembled as he spoke the last sentence" (AB 79). Both his feelings and his reticence are typical of the gentle hero. A traditional hero might be inarticulate, but he would be unlikely to show such delicate sensitivity. Refusing the human attachment Seth offers, Dinah says, "God has called me to minister to others, not have any joys or sorrows of my own," admitting that the suffering she is so concerned about is really external to herself. By exempting herself from normal domestic experience and personal emotion, she actually declines to take responsibility for her own life--in much the same way Dorothea Brooke does when she marries Casaubon in Middlemarch.

Feminist critics have tried to claim George Eliot as one of their own, but Eliot is not easily caught in their net. The endings of Middlemarch and Adam Bede are problematic for some readers because they so quickly resolve into marriage and children. Yet there can be no doubt

that for Eliot, as for Dickens, domestic happiness was the greatest of all goods, and a woman need not be a nincompoop to discover that. Even though Seth does not marry Dinah himself, he does further her acceptance of marriage in a way that Feuerbach would approve. Seth's love is moral and, though sexual, it remains pure--true to the gentle hero's ideal nature. Adam and Dinah's love is charged with the passion that Feuerbach saw as the basis of society and that Eliot accepted as necessary to a satisfactory life.

But for Seth, the gentle hero, sensual love is not a joy but a trial, and it leads him to know suffering first-hand. "He was but three-and-twenty, and had only just learned what it is to love--to love with that adoration which a young man gives to a woman whom he feels to be greater and better than himself. Love of this sort is hardly distinguished from religious feeling" (AB 81). Seth's love for Dinah, like Dobbin's for Amelia, is the moral smithy where his soul is forged. We may see Dinah's saintly renunciations as less-than-wonderful, but to Seth Dinah is everything a woman should be--and will be once sex enters her life. His devotion is what marks him as a gentle hero and goes far to redeem whatever failings he may have. He accepts his fate and internalizes his grief. He resolves "to repress his sadness, to be less

bent on having his own will, and to live more for others, as Dinah does" (AB 82). As a gentle hero, Seth lives for others by living in harmony and sympathy with those around him; throughout most of the novel, Dinah lives for others by denying her normal human feelings and making her life a relic to venerate rather than a living thing to embrace.

Dinah may offer occasional comfort to the strangers in her little congregation at Stoniton, but Seth gives it unstintingly to his family right at home. His mother, Lisbeth, goes on at him from morning till night, "for she was not at all afraid of Seth and usually poured into his ears all the querulousness which was repressed by her awe of Adam. Seth had never in his life spoken a harsh word to his mother, and timid people always wreak their peevishness on the gentle" [!] (AB 88). There is an authenticity in Seth's love for Dinah that is strangely absent in Dinah's love for humankind, despite her protestations. And her love for humanity differs from Feuerbach's religion of humanity so long as she denies the personal, sexual claims of love in favor of something more spiritual and self-denying. Seth may think it is Methodism that motivates him to be kind, but it is actually his own nature as a gentle hero. He demonstrates Feuerbach's love in action, concerned with simple goodness in the here and now. "[W]e shouldn't be over-anxious and

worretting ourselves about what'll happen tomorrow," says Seth, "but do our duty and leave the rest to God's will" (AB 90).

Seth knows where his duty lies--with his community, his fellow workers, his family, the woman he loves. Dinah must discover the importance of her own primary feelings --in her relation to Adam--and learn that abstract philanthropy is a poor substitute for the love of a husband and children. Dinah accepts Adam, whose name obviously implies the human father of mankind, while Seth, like Christ, remains a celibate witness to the sensual fulfillment of others.

The Law of Consequences and Eliot's Gentle Hero

Feuerbach and positivist thinkers like Comte believed that reality could only be understood by engaging the real world, where the gentle hero lives. Whereas a metaphysical philosophy is concerned with a higher ontology and a belief in innate ideas transcending ordinary experience, Feuerbach and the positivists believed that reality lies in the concrete world. For them direct experience was the only route to truth; deductions based on abstract faith were illusory and dangerous. That is not to say that positivism could unravel all the cosmic mysteries; much lies beyond

man's experience and powers of perception. But it is through the direct experience of his senses, in the positivist view, that man begins to understand the universe and his place in it (Paris 19-20).

Huxley, Darwin, Spencer, and Lewes had helped to reveal the biological and geological evolution of the earth. In Feuerbach and Eliot this evolutionary model is mirrored in the moral sphere as well, with both social structures and individual conscience participating in communal and moral development. But if moral evolution had followed the course of Darwinian "survival of the fittest," the result would not have been a community like Hayslope, where "gentle" values win out over aggressive, self-interested ones. Moral evolution was not, in the positivist view, like nature, "red in tooth and claw;" rather, it was directed by "human feeling and conscious purpose" (Paris 14). According to Huxley, "in place of ruthless selfassertion" the ethical process "demands self-restraint" (Paris 14), a demand quite counter to the ravening appetites of unrestrained nature.

If moral evolution is, like physical evolution, part of the reality of the cosmos, then what are the attributes of that system and how does the drama of man's life play into it? More to the point, how does the gentle hero exemplify natural law? First of all, the positivists

believed that man is by nature social and sympathetic. It is part of man's genetic make-up to form communities and sympathetic relations, not because God ordains it but because human feeling precipitates a social order. More than anything else, the gentle hero connects sympathetically to his immediate social world.

In a book review for the Westminster Review, Eliot writes that "each age and each race has had a faith and a symbolism suited to its need and its stage of development, and that for succeeding ages to dream of retaining the spirit along with the forms of the past, is as futile as the embalming of the dead body in the hope that it may one day be resumed by the living soul" (Haight 80). Belief in the symbolism and substance of Christianity was no longer possible for Eliot and many other Victorian intellectuals; it was easier for them to believe in a scientific model like Darwinian evolution. John Chapman and Charles Bray both maintained that physical and moral life were subject to an "inexorable law of consequences" (Haight 80), an idea that provided Eliot with the structural underpinnings of her plots and explains the fate of her characters, including especially the gentle hero.

In Middlemarch Eliot describes communal life as a spider's web that vibrates all over when any one point is touched. The slightest lapse by the most insignificant

dairymaid--as in Adam Bede--may set in motion a chain of events that will have tragic consequences for the whole community. Our lives, Eliot believed, are determined by a series of irremediable acts. Once a thing is done, it cannot be undone, and good intentions and sincere regrets will go for nought. These acts result from a combination of chance and nature; there are both external and internal causes, though what is external to one may be the acting out of another's natural character. In this way, we are all linked to each other in a continuous interweaving of mutual responsibility. The gentle hero, Seth Bede, recognizes and accepts his responsibility to others with the ease and inevitability of a man with a natural endowment of goodness.

In a sense, it is easy for him to be self-abnegating and generous because his nature precludes meanness of any kind. One reason he is often overlooked in critical considerations of the novel is the lack of conflict in his relations with others. He may suffer and feel a good deal of internal distress; he may weep tears of longing and loss, but his actions in regards to others are never in question the way Adam's or Arthur's are. There is no moral development in Seth, but that does not mean his character is limited or unimportant. He is the embodiment of the moral life Eliot celebrates in Hayslope. Without

him--and Mr. Irwine--the center of village life would not hold.

Nature and circumstance combine when Arthur and Hetty meet. When Arthur, pricked by conscience, hints at his dilemma with her to Mr. Irwine, the novel's second gentle hero, Mr. Irwine says, "A man can never do anything at variance with his own nature...." But nature doesn't explain everything. "[O]ne may be betrayed into doing things by a combination of circumstances, which one might never have done otherwise," says Arthur, "surely you don't think a man who struggles against a temptation into which he falls at last, as bad as the man who never struggles at all?"

"No, my boy," says Mr. Irwine, "I pity him, in proportion to his struggles, for they foreshadow the inward suffering which is the worst form of Nemesis. Consequences are unpitying. Our deeds carry their terrible consequences...that are hardly ever confined to ourselves" (AB 217). So many things in Adam Bede are contingent and conditional. "And if he'd never come near her...", "if you had, you would be more generous...", "if I'd known you loved her...", "she'd be good if you'd let her...", "if it had been ordered so that you could ha' been my sister..." --these are just a few of the "if's" in Adam Bede. It is so easy to see how things might have gone

differently, "if only," and yet there is a certain tragic inevitability to the novel's action. Nature provides a mighty weight, but chance tips the balance, and once action has begun to shift, there is little anyone, not even the gentle hero, can do to stop it.

Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds; and until we know what has been or will be the peculiar combination of outward with inward facts, which constitutes a man's critical actions, it will be better not to think ourselves wise about his character. There is a terrible coercion in our deeds which may first turn the honest man into a deceiver, and then reconcile him to the change. (AB 359) .

Arthur, Hetty, Adam, and Dinah make choices and undertake to do things that alter their own fates and impinge on the lives of others. But it is difficult to think of anything Seth does to change the course of the novel. This is a common condition of the gentle hero, who often does seem extraneous to the major workings of the plot. His function is not action but judgment: he is the template against which other men must be measured. The template is not part of the finished piece of work, nor is the gentle hero central to the novel's main action, yet both are necessary to the structure of the finished enterprise. The gentle hero doesn't alter the plot, but without him Eliot's web of mutuality would tear loose.

Finally, it is the combination of our own nature with the circumstances we both create and encounter by chance

that shapes our life. Our fate is partially a result of things beyond our control--our genetic endowment, the time and place of our birth, say--and things we do control, our acts in relation to others. There is no escaping the consequences of this combination of forces, but in Adam Bede the gentle hero Seth stands a bit to one side, a natural source of goodness uncomplicated by mixed motives, ordinary selfishness, or tragic disappointment.

Society and the Self: The Question of Ego
and the Gentle Hero

In the nature of things man lives to serve his ego, but paradoxically he must rein in his egotism and submit to the demands of his society in order to find fulfillment. This is, in fact, the meaning of Eliot's fiction and the key to understanding her treatment of the gentle hero. Unlike Dickens, whose outlook was far more radical and subversive, Eliot did not see society as the enemy of the individual. Society placed limits on human behavior, to be sure, but when man achieved social harmony, personal happiness was more likely to follow.

As Calvin Bedient notes, Eliot's characters are often not "Victorian" enough. It is society that must redeem them from Freud's "crude life of the instincts" (33)--the instincts that a gentle hero like Seth Bede controls so

well. Bedient says that for Eliot "any society is preferable to the explosive egoism of the individual" (34). This perhaps overstates the case. Certainly it is not through bending to the will of society that Dorothea Brooke finds happiness with Will Ladislaw in Middlemarch. In Eliot's fiction society is not evil, but it is a world with which the individual must come to terms. It may seem paradoxical that a woman who broke with her family to live with a married man should be such an exponent of social convention, but one need not be a believer to see the value of religion, nor a wife to appreciate the value of marriage. Seth Bede, more than anyone else in Adam Bede, except perhaps Mr. Irwine and the Poyzers, lives in harmony with himself and his community. Hetty's tragedy paradoxically functions to draw Dinah and Adam into closer proximity with the community and a deeper, more significant (in Feuerbachian terms) relation with each other. Seth's life is uniformly harmonious, and his benign influence frames the action of the novel and blesses the union of his brother and Dinah.

There is a disarming simplicity about Adam Bede. Its language is evocative of the English countryside and the comforting rhythms of rural life. Its characters are straightforward and for the most part unselfconscious. But Eliot's view of experience is anything but reductive.

She understands full well the complexities of life and the myriad of difficulties that litter the path of even the best-intentioned and highly principled. To live is to cause trouble to someone. Making the best of that fact is what leads to virtue and, in crucial instances, to a gentle hero like Seth Bede.

For Eliot the central problem of moral life is most often the conflict between a strong ego--like that of Adam or Dinah--and cosmic law embodied in social norms. Adam certainly has a strong ego that is broken by his suffering over Hetty, whose fate is in part determined by the community's reaction to her pregnancy. Dinah has a strong ego too, for all that she cloaks it in piety and self-denial. Hers is the ego of renunciation and assumed spiritual superiority. Until her marriage to Adam, she is essentially estranged from the society to which she belongs: her family and her native place. Very often the central egoistic character in an Eliot novel is female: Dorothea Brooke, Maggie Tulliver, Gwendolyn Harleth, Romola. In Adam Bede, however, it is more difficult to determine exactly which ego it is that is the main object of the author's moral scrutiny. Adam Bede is not entirely Adam's book, nor is it Arthur's or Dinah's. It is certainly not Hetty's, despite the drama of her crime and punishment. In some ways, this lack of focus on a particular character

may make the novel seem diffuse. But rather than focusing on a single character in Adam Bede, Eliot looks at the whole community of Hayslope, whose most "connected" character is Seth Bede. It is not a single character's destiny that is in question, but rather that of a whole society. Like the famous web image in Middlemarch, the texture of Hayslope is a dense interweaving of individual fates; to be exempt from the community is to die morally, and Seth seeks no such exemption.

If Seth is fully integrated into the community, it is Hetty who stands nearest the edge. Both Dinah and Hetty are orphans, and as such are not so tightly bound to Hayslope as Seth and Adam, who live with their parents. Dinah needs to bind herself to a man and enter the sexual life, which Feuerbach--and Eliot--sees as the highest form of human love. But Hetty is all too physical; she lacks the fellow-feeling and human sympathy that makes Seth's gentle sexuality a positive, rather than a purely self-indulgent, thing.

Hetty is everything that Seth is not. She is vain, petulant, pretty, and none too bright. She is as egotistical as Seth is self-abnegating. But not all critics have judged her harshly. Robert Speaight sees her as the "femme moyenne sensuelle at her most attractive" (45). Gerald Bullett accepts Hetty and Arthur's illicit affair

as a genuine "idyll of first love" (175). And Walter Allen, Joseph Warren Beach, and V. S. Pritchett see Hetty as an essentially innocent scapegoat for Eliot's own feelings of guilt (102, 19, & 92, respectively). Hetty is described most often as a kitten, an animal, or some kind of flower. She is pure, self-regarding beauty, with no social affinities to speak of. When Thias Bede drowns, she is momentarily bewildered, believing at first that Adam has died. As soon as she discovers that it is only the old man, she "look[s] serious, but [is] not deeply affected" (AB 140). She has a good hand with the butter but no patience with her little cousin Totty. The gentle hero Seth, on the other hand, is an adoring uncle, who, without a shred of the egoist's jealousy, gathers his brother's children into his arms as if they were his own.

But whether Hetty is a Christ-figure, as at least one critic implausibly maintains, or whether she is base and guilty is really irrelevant, for it is not so much Hetty's character and fate that are in question as her influence on those around her. Like the catalyst in a chemistry experiment, she remains inert, but the fireworks she creates are stupendous, and from the smoke of those fireworks there emerges, rather timidly, the gentle hero Seth.

Hetty is cast out of Hayslope society, and her isolation has tragic consequences. Seth, however, is never in danger of such estrangement, and it is he who settles comfortably into the domesticity of his brother's life, a life that might have been Hetty's if she had chosen it. In subduing his own ego Seth achieves a measure of harmony, if not of complete fulfillment. True to the character of all the gentle heroes considered here, Seth manages to make a relatively good thing of what might have been bitter disappointment, in large measure because his own ego is not what is most important to him.

We encounter Seth Bede at his best when Adam returns from his fruitless search for Hetty. Seth, already an initiate to suffering, hears Adam stirring in the room below and thinks first of his brother, then of his own need for Dinah. He loves her, wants her to return to Hayslope, and hopes that Adam, along with finding Hetty, has brought Dinah back. "Seth felt that that was the greatest happiness he could look forward to for himself, though he had no hope left that she would ever love him well enough to marry him" (AB 445). (Seth sounds here like Dobbin on the eve of Waterloo, vowing to serve Amelia if only he can be near her.) As soon as Seth sees Adam, he knows something terrible has happened. "Adam was unable to speak: the strong man, accustomed to suppress the signs

of sorrow, had felt his heart swell like a child's at the first approach of sympathy. He fell on Seth's neck and sobbed" (AB 445). It is not strength that is needed now but sympathy, not pride but fellow-feeling, and the gentle hero provides both in abundance.

Here and elsewhere, he is bound to others, but the web of mutuality to which he adheres so strongly is constantly threatened by the egotism of those he loves. To such a threat duty--that stern mistress of the will--is often the only antidote and corrective. We know that a sense of moral obligation loomed large in George Eliot's own life. After her father died, Eliot feared the loss of his moral restraint upon her own egoism. "I had a horrid vision of myself...becoming earthly sensual and devilish for want of that purifying restraining influence" (Letters I, 284). The one thing that could contain her ego, while at the same time giving it some scope in action, was dedication to duty, a word not much in favor in these days of unbridled and celebrated egoism, but one which led G. M. Young to call George Eliot the Victorian moralist. F. W. H. Myers recorded a conversation he had with Eliot in the Fellows Garden at Trinity one rainy evening: she, stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her

text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men,--the words, God, Immortality, Duty,--pronounced, with terrible

earnestness, how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third. Never, perhaps, have sterner accents affirmed the sovereignty of unrecompensing Law. (Haight 464)

Because he senses a like obligation and is a gentle hero, Seth does not have to strain to subdue his ego or to do his duty--to his mother, to his brother, to his friends--the way Dinah often seems to. Duty does not necessarily imply strictures on the self, though it often seems that way to those who try to shirk it. Like the flooding river in The Mill on the Floss, experience is a stream against whose current the individual must swim. Those, like Hetty, who give in to purely sensual pleasure, or like Arthur, who struggle weakly, will be washed away; while others can, by exerting their will in the direction of social responsibility, keep even with it, as Seth does.

Duty to one's family, domestic success, which is the special victory of the gentle hero, is the only success that seems to matter to Eliot, both in her fiction and ultimately in her life. Work is essential to character, but when external commitment interrupts personal attachments, disaster follows--a truth Seth Bede in his simple way never forgets. Dinah's missionary zeal comes between her and her family and the men (Seth and later Adam) who love her. Adam's work comes between himself and his parents; until he undergoes his moral enlightenment,

his work often estranges him from the community, for example when he puts principle above diplomacy in a dispute with Squire Donnithorne or when he withdraws from his family into the workshop. In his way he is as unbending about the management of lumber and carpentry as Dinah is about serving the poor. Both Adam and Dinah need to learn to stop trying for success only in the outer world and to serve one other first. Until they learn to serve each other, they constantly pit the demands of the world against their own undeniable needs. The result is frigidity in Dinah and quick-tempered stubbornness in Adam. Without love there is no harmony, and without harmony there can be no social cohesiveness. In a curious way, Adam's and Dinah's apparent strength is actually their weakness. That is why the gentle hero is so important as a moral focal point and exemplar of the true good life: above all else, he provides a necessary contrast and a livable ideal. It is his nature to do so.

There are countless references in Adam Bede to the characters' "nature," the quality of their instinctive ego, in other words. Freud said that biology is destiny; for Eliot it is one's inherited physical, intellectual, and emotional endowment that provides the inescapable framework of the individual life. It is Adam's self-proclaimed nature to be harsh; it is Martin Poyser's

nature to be stolid and elephant-like, with his two little sons trotting like small elephants behind him. It is Arthur's nature to crave the admiration and affection of all who know him. It is Hetty's nature to be lethally innocent, like a kitten or a flower.

Seth's nature, of course, is gentle and kind. His goodness is unreflecting and instinctive. He is what we should all be if our own genetic endowments did not pull us in such often contradictory directions. There is in the very fact of evolution and the inheritance of genetic characteristics a tragic element. Early in Adam Bede, the narrator celebrates this sad truth.

Family likeness has often a deep sadness in it. Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains; blends yearning and repulsion; and ties us by our heartstrings to the beings that jar us at every movement. We hear a voice with the very cadence of our own uttering the thoughts we despise; we see eyes--ah! so like our mother's--averted from us in cold alienation; and our last darling child startles us with the air and gestures of the sister we parted from in bitterness long years ago. (AB 84)

We cannot change the genetic legacy nature leaves to us; we cannot escape the lineaments of our own ego. How then is one to judge the nature of another? Mr. Irwine--in many ways a gentle hero--and his formidable mother discuss the problem in Adam Bede. "'Don't you remember how it was with Juno's last pups?'" says Mr.

Irvine. "'One of them was the very image of its mother but it had two or three of its father's tricks notwithstanding. Nature is clever enough to cheat even you, mother.'" The old woman maintains a comfortably simple view of the matter: "'Nonsense, child! Nature never makes a ferret in the shape of a mastiff. You'll never persuade me that I can't tell what men are by their outsides. If I don't like a man's looks, depend upon it I shall never like him'" (AB 109).

Mrs. Irvine is only partially right. If we were to compare Adam and Seth on the basis of looks only, then Adam would be judged superior. But the gentle hero's superiority is not always so obvious if what you seek is beauty and force, and compared to strapping Adam, gentle Seth seems to lack both.

Just as we can't escape our own egos, neither can we help making mistakes about the nature and extent of other's egotism. The narrator says, "Nature has her language, and she is not unveracious; but we don't know all the intricacies of her syntax just yet, and in a hasty reading we may happen to extract the very opposite of her real meaning" (AB 198-99). So we must learn discernment; we must make adjustments. We must attend to our own behavior, even as we must learn to judge others more charitably. We must chasten the ego and amend nature's

endowment, for to remain as nature left us is to risk being like Hetty. Nature makes the gentle hero too, and we should all try to be more like him, but there are more Arthurs and Adams in this world than there are Seths. It has been said--erroneously--that to understand all is to forgive all, and it might seem that that is all Eliot is trying to say. But to stop there would be to stop short. There remains the question of responsibility. We must learn to do better.

This implies the possibility of individual change and moral improvement, and as Felicia Bonaparte has noted, Eliot's characters exist "in a state of unending mutability." In Bonaparte's view, the novelist has a modern approach to personality, which sees the individual as existing in a "constant state of evolution" (52). The genetic endowment that gives a man his essential nature is not static; change and growth are possible, for human character is the result of both external and internal forces. It is the intricate interaction of nature and experience, determinism and free will, that leads to a moral evolution which tends, one hopes, toward the gentle hero. Because existence is by definition isolating--and the isolation of the ego, according to Eliot, is evil--it is the social web that holds one man to another and holds each accountable. Anything that conduces to social

harmony, therefore, is valuable; anything that threatens it is malign, even if the malefactor is in some sense innocent, like Hetty, or even Arthur.

After visiting a church in Munich in 1858, Eliot writes, "How the music that stirs all one's devout emotions blends everything into harmony,--makes one feel part of one whole, which one loves all alike, losing the sense of a separate self" (Haight 256). This unity, this lack of egoism, is always Eliot's ideal, even when she seems to celebrate the individual will in, say, Dorothea Brooke or Maggie Tulliver. But these and Eliot's other egoists are brought either to change or to die. Only those who submit their egos to the needs of others achieve the integration and the, admittedly partial, fulfillment of the gentle hero.

But Eliot harbors no utopian fantasies. She knows that the hard facts of life are never going to go away. As Bernard Paris notes, moral evolution will always be hindered by the lack of intelligence in most men and the proliferation of antagonistic groups within society (17). Social unity may be imperfect, but for those who are willing to learn there is a way out. Seth Bede is among the lucky few who find it, for blessed by natural goodness and inherent decency, he does not even have to search out a

path to the moral life. It lies directly before his gentle gaze.

Eliot's Gentle Hero as the "Man of Sorrows"

Our destiny is tragic, George Eliot maintains, because we must act according to our inner natures, committing acts which have irremediable consequences that can be neither completely foreseen nor prevented. She is a determinist who believes in free will, and she apportions moral blame only insofar as a given character is capable of moral growth. Intelligent characters are expected to be better than stupid ones.

In Adam Bede there are characters who learn and grow--Adam, Dinah, and Arthur--and characters who remain essentially unchanged--Hetty, Mr. Irwine, the Poysers, Bertle Massey, and Seth Bede. True, Hetty effects a change of heart on the eve of what she believes will be her execution, but it has more the ring of justified desperation than of true dedication. Of the static characters, only Hetty and Seth are intimately concerned in the action of the novel, so while they are by definition minor characters, they are nevertheless of crucial importance. This is obvious with Hetty, but it is also true of Seth. While Hetty initiates the tragic action, Seth embodies the proper

moral response to life's vicissitudes. He is Eliot's gentle hero, a Feuerbachian "Man of Sorrows" whose suffering humanizes him and ameliorates the suffering of those around him.

It is only through suffering, Feuerbach wrote and Eliot believed, that the individual discovers his own better nature and his connection to others. The symbol of the crucified Christ, therefore, was a powerful one for Eliot, even after she had broken with traditional Christianity. As she translated Strauss's Das Leben Jesu, a cross hung above her desk; she nearly broke down when she came to the crucifixion, and in Adam Bede she says that man needs a "Suffering God."

The nature of this suffering is almost wholly emotional loss. While medieval literature often focuses on the endurance of physical pain as the measure of man's stature and treats the reader to a seemingly endless catalogue of grievous, bodily wounds (even if physical wounds are meant to symbolize spiritual ones), Victorian literature dwells on the renunciation of love as the source of suffering. Knoepfelmacher finds that "Adam Bede eventually becomes a personification of Feuerbach's Suffering Jesus" (90), and to a certain extent he does. So does his brother Seth, but there are crucial differences between them. Adam's suffering over Hetty's crime and punishment at first

leads him to seek vengeance against Arthur in a most un-Christlike way. Not until he learns what Seth already knows--that gentleness and forgiveness are what will ease his own suffering--does he accept the finality of Hetty's fall.

The kindly and forgiving Mr. Irwine speaks for George Eliot when he tells Adam,

you have no right to say that the guilt of her crime lies with [Arthur], and that he ought to bear the punishment. It is not for us men to apportion the shares of moral guilt and retribution. We find it impossible to avoid mistakes even in determining who has committed a single criminal act, and the problem how far a man is to be held responsible for the unforeseen consequences of his own deed, is one that might well make us tremble to look into it. The evil consequences that may lie folded in a single act of selfish indulgence, is a thought so awful that it ought surely to awaken some feeling less presumptuous than a rash desire to punish. (AB 468-69).

Adam's desire for vengeance is understandable, but he must be brought to see that just because good does not come from evil that does not mean things remain the same. As Eliot's narrator writes near the end of Adam Bede, "It would be a poor result of all our anguish and wrestling, if we won nothing but our old selves at the end of it" (AB 531).

Adam's suffering humanizes him, but we can only guess at how his redefinition will affect the rest of his community. True, he discovers his love for Dinah and

convinces her to join him in the celebration of human life, but his experience does not radiate outward in the way that Seth's does. In accepting that his love for Dinah will not be returned, Seth serves a higher good, for Adam and Dinah need each other to complete a pattern that already has a place for Seth. Seth loves Dinah, but he doesn't need her to grow morally the way Adam does. He suffers quietly, and, like Dobbin in Vanity Fair, is given little recompense beyond an avuncular role with the children of the next generation.

Through suffering comes illumination--Seth's and, more importantly, others'. As the gentle hero, Seth's patience and love give Adam the courage to relinquish Hetty and Dinah the wisdom to embrace Adam. The means of their education is twofold: love and suffering. It is the gentle hero who best embodies both. Knoepfelmacher observes that "the recognition of sorrow [in Eliot's novels] triggers an awareness of a higher order of reality" (124). For Feuerbach also the core of that reality is love--and suffering. Only through suffering can the individual become fully human, as the German thinker argues:

I am just and honest, not because I expect to live in another world, but, because, having felt the pain of injustice and dishonesty towards myself, I have a fellow-feeling with other men, who would suffer the same pain if I were unjust or dishonest towards them...The fact is, I do not love myself alone, whatever logical necessity there may be for that

conclusion in your mind....It is a pang to me to witness the suffering of a fellow-being, and I feel his suffering the more acutely because he is mortal--because his life is so short, and I would have it, if possible, filled with happiness and not misery. Through my union and fellowship with the men and women I have seen, I feel a like, though fainter, sympathy with those I have not seen; and I am able so to live in imagination with the generations to come, that their good is not alien to me, and is a stimulus to me to labour for ends which may not benefit myself, but will benefit them. (52-53, Creeger 18)

The inarticulate Seth would never have said this, but he always feels it and always acts upon it.

Suffering, imagined and real, urges the sympathetic character to a better course of action, but it is love that enables the imagination to function at all. "It is the function of love in the largest sense, to mitigate the harshness of all fatalities....[to] lighten the pressure of hard non-moral, outward conditions" (Eliot, Letters IV, 364-65). As Dinah tells Hetty in the prison-house, "the suffering [is] less hard when you have somebody with you" (AB 494).

Seth Bede loves his mother and brother, despite the sharp tongue of the one and the occasional prickliness of the other. But it is his unrequited love for Dinah that illuminates him, that initiates him into the brotherhood of suffering, that requires the quiet nobility of sacrifice. He does not change or grow morally. His nature is fixed, but his heart is expansive. He is in

the novel at the very first and at the very last, with Adam and Dinah's children in his arms. He may not be the protagonist, but he is the book's moral center and secret heart.

Thackeray once made an interesting sketch of the Leweses and Thornton Hunt, Agnes Lewes's lover, that might serve as an emblem for the gentle hero. The drawing shows Agnes seated at a piano. Her husband stands beside her, and just a foot away Thornton Hunt looks on with a proprietarial air. Barely visible, in the upper right-hand corner, is the suggestion of Thackeray's bespectacled, flat-nosed visage, watching over all (Haight, plate VI). So too, the gentle hero hovers near the scene of dramatic action, part of the picture, but not quite the center of it. It is his fate to watch the tragic action unfold, to love and suffer sympathetically, and to provide an enduring support to those around him, who are often too witless to fully appreciate the "Man of Sorrows" who is in their midst or to profit from his timid but radiant example.

CHAPTER IV

THE GENTLE HERO IN DICKENS'S BLEAK HOUSE

Introduction

Bleak House is a good novel to consider when examining Dickens's use of the gentle hero, for it is perhaps the most typical, as well as one of the best, of his books. As Morton Dauwen Zabel says, "The novel not only stands at the apex of his career. It perhaps forms the central buttress, the decisive moment in his achievement. It has the effect of bringing to a climax everything in his work that preceded it, and of preparing the way for all he was to write afterward" (BH x). The development of the gentle hero in Bleak House is very like that in Dickens's other books and thus provides a gloss on the whole of his work, both before and after this most representative novel.

But in examining the gentle hero in Bleak House it is well to bear in mind certain idiosyncrasies of Dickens's fiction. Readers are familiar with the sort of exaggeration Dickens is prone to, especially in characterization: the greasy Jew Fagin, the damp-handed Uriah Heep, the simple-minded Mr. Dick. To say that Dickens's characters

are often caricatures is to state the obvious. One difference, then, between Dickens's gentle hero and those of Thackeray, say, or of George Eliot, is the degree of exaggeration with which he is treated. The characters in Bleak House come equipped with verbal or visual tags that both remind the reader of these characters' essential natures and reduce--some might say unfortunately--each of them to one or two identifying tics. Esther Summerson forever rattles her housekeeping keys; Mr. Vholes continually refers to his three daughters and his father in Taunton; the man "of the name of Guppy" carries Esther's image "imprinted on [his] 'art"; and Mr. Jarndyce complains of the wind when it is in the east--that is to say when things become difficult--and retreats to his Growlery when his psychological weather gets blustery.

Dickens's gentle hero, then, is like these other characters in the almost cartoon-like treatment he receives. In this sense he is not particularly realistic, as, say, Dobbin or Seth Bede is. There are other differences too: Mr. Jarndyce--the gentle hero of Bleak House--is more emphatically a gentleman in the purely social sense. He is one of the landed gentry, with a country estate--Bleak House--and a house in town. He has private means and doesn't work for a living. In fact, beyond worrying about his wards, it is difficult to say that he does much of

anything. He lacks the opportunity to demonstrate the physical courage of Dobbin, and he has no need to engage in the purposeful activity of Seth Bede. But this only limits his scope; it does not preclude his being a gentle hero. That he is indeed a gentle hero, we shall see. More important, we shall discover through this character the essential quality of Dickens's moral vision.

In many ways Bleak House is Esther Summerson's book. She is one of Dickens's gallery of long-suffering orphans, whose innate goodness shines like a beacon through the glooms of the mid-Victorian world of factories, workhouses, mean streets, and clotted social institutions. Even so, her virtues, considerable though they are, do not carry the positive moral force of the novel. Her goodness derives from her suffering, from her endurance of the difficulties she encounters in the external world. Her response to her own pain, or others', is instinctive and effortless, and her virtue is, therefore, not hard won and seems, to the modern reader at least, a little suspect.

The real moral pivot of Bleak House is John Jarndyce. His tally of good deeds may not measure up to that of Esther (or for that matter of Allan Woodcourt, of whom we shall have more to say later), but he undergoes a revolution of the heart that changes his life, even as it costs him his only love. His struggle, insignificant though it may

seem to the overall thrust of the novel's concern with social reform, is the real moral drama, its outcome the book's overwhelming victory.

To understand this victory's real significance, we need to remember that the overwhelming issue in the novels of Charles Dickens is the parent-child relation. Oliver Twist is an orphan without parents; David Copperfield has a weak mother and a tyrannical step-father; Pip is an orphan brought up "by hand" by his sister and brother-in-law. Again and again in Dickens we encounter children without parents, or with ineffectual or wicked parents, or with surrogate parents who fulfill the parental ideal when the actual parents fail. In Bleak House, written in 1851, when Dickens was forty and a well-established figure in the literary world, we find examples of all three categories, each an integral part of this complex, wide-ranging novel.

As Fred Kaplan points out, "His own experience had made the child figure central to his [Dickens's] imagination, the sensitive youth whose sense of his worth is assaulted by a hostile world from infancy onward" (95). Indeed, the heroes and heroines of Dickens's world retain this sense of victimization into young adulthood, relinquishing it, if at all, only when they become parents themselves. In Bleak House "parental delinquencies" are,

according to Arthur Adrian, "symptoms of a disordered society" (123). While the court of Chancery is Dickens's ostensible target (its reform was actually well underway by the time Dickens undertook to write the book), with organized philanthropy, industrialization, the decline of the aristocracy, the failure of social institutions, and the treatment of the poor claiming their share of his satire as well, an even greater concern in the novel is the parent-child relation.

While Dickens's was perhaps the most remarkable voice calling for social reform in the nineteenth century, in the end it was the personal and intimate that touched him most deeply. Perhaps there is finally little to choose between his hyper-eloquent rages against slum conditions and the weeping sentimentality surrounding the death of an indigent child, but it is in the private world of the individual--and especially of individual women--that Dickens's moral force shows itself most persuasively. As Michael Slater has noted, "It was always in terms of personal relationships, especially within a family grouping, that woman, for him as for most Victorians, realized her full moral and spiritual potential." Further, the "true source of heroism in woman is always domestic" (309). It follows, then, that the gentle hero, whose own moral nature is defined in conjunction with the female, must

find his way to heroism around the domestic hearth. It is at home, among his "family," where we find the gentle hero of Bleak House, John Jarndyce, who functions as an ideal father figure to Richard, Ada, and Esther and a paternalistic ideal to Jo, Miss Flite, Skimpole, Boythorn, and the rest.

Orphans abound in Bleak House: Charley, Tom, and Emma Coavinses; Bart and Judy Smallweed (grandparents notwithstanding); Jo of Tom-all-Alone's; and of course Richard Carstone, Ada Clare, and Esther Summerson. All are, to a greater or lesser degree, rescued or helped by John Jarndyce, the gentle hero of Bleak House and the major father figure in the novel, though there are many other paternal figures as well. He serves as the lynchpin of both the plot, which is complex, and the moral intent, which is relatively simple. Allan Woodcourt shares many of the gentle hero's characteristics too, if rather sketchily, but it is Mr. Jarndyce who carries the moral freight of the novel.

In what ways is he a gentle hero? First, he is passive, even withdrawn. Second, he considers the fortunes of others above his own. Third, he is long-suffering and slow to anger. And fourth, he loses the woman he loves to another man, not because he is unworthy but because he values her happiness more than his own. Like a

life-giving sun, he is ultimately central to the lives of all the characters in the book, whether they revolve in a close orbit around him, like Esther, Richard, and Ada, or move at a greater distance, like Jo and Miss Flite. Radiating warmth and benevolence, he is generally associated with "light" and "brightness." In Esther's words: "I saw his kind face lighted up by its pleasantest smile" (BH 616). "I have often spoken of his bright face, but I had never seen it look so bright and good. There was a high happiness upon it, which made me think, 'he has been doing some great kindness this morning'" (BH 633). Or when Richard lies dying, soon to find the only release from Chancery possible to him, "my Guardian [Mr. Jarndyce], the picture of a good man, sat down in my [Esther's] place, keeping his hand on Richard's. 'My dear Rick,' said he, 'the clouds have cleared away, and it is bright now'" (BH 658).

Richard and Ada constantly move between light and shadow, the shadow representing the blight of Chancery upon their lives, the light the hospitality and forbearance of their generous older cousin--the novel's gentle hero--as well as the brief flicker of happiness (mainly sexual) they manage to find together. Early in their stay at Bleak House, Esther says,

The door stood open, and we both followed them with our eyes, as they passed down the adjoining room on which the sun was shining, and out at its farther end. Richard with his head bent, and her hand drawn through his arm, was talking to her very earnestly; and she looked up in his face, listening, and seemed to see nothing else. So young, so beautiful, so full of hope and promise, they went on lightly through the sunlight, as their own happy thoughts might then be traversing the years to come, and making them all years of brightness. So they passed away into the shadow, and were gone. It was only a burst of light that had been so radiant. The room darkened as they went out, and the sun was clouded over. (BH 137-38).

Significantly, this light shines for them only at the home and within the ambience of the novel's gentle hero.

Mr. Jarndyce is a father figure, to be sure, and as he and Esther watch the two young lovers walk together, we feel the benevolence of his gaze upon them. Yet he is unable to save Rick, or even to slow his ruin. He is a good "parent" because he is attentive, as Mrs. Jellyby is not, because he is not profligate, like Harold Skimpole, and because he is loyal, like Matthew Bagnet, another successful father. But he is not a good parent in the sense that his actions intercede with destiny. His success is not one of active accomplishment. Indeed, he fails to save Richard. Still, it is his fatherly role that defines him, for every "good" character in Dickens is in some measure a good parent.

Richard, of course, is no kind of father at all. Consumed by his obsession with the disposition of the will

in Chancery, he dies, leaving his infant son an orphan. Mr. Jarndyce takes on the parental role again with the new baby; one hopes he will have better luck with him than he had with the father. Every consideration of the gentle hero in Bleak House, then, must be viewed in the light--often quite literal--of the parent-child relation. In the end, everything reduces down to that, including even romantic love. As Kaplan has pointed out, Dickens's own life had prepared the way for the Jarndyce-Summerson connection. Not only was Dickens extremely fond of his own two daughters, he also had very deep attachments to two of his wife's sisters, Mary, who died young, and Georgina, who became his housekeeper and remained with him even after he had parted from his wife. According to Kaplan, "For Dickens, emotionally and unconsciously, the line between daughter-sister and daughter-sister-wife was sufficiently blurred for there to be significant overlap" (302).

Mr. Jarndyce's Withdrawal from Public Controversy

Much of the structure of Dickens's novels rests on the pairing of opposites: Lady Dedlock and her sister, the professional philanthropists--Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle--and the genuine servants of mankind--Mr. George

and Allan Woodcourt, to name but a few. Mr. Jarndyce's opposite, the black hole of Bleak House, is the lawyer Tulkinghorn, who moves in the dark and casts long shadows: "Interposed between [Lady Dedlock] and the fading light of the day in the now quiet street, his shadow falls upon her, and he darkens all before her. Even so does he darken her life" (BH 495).

But despite the obvious opposition between Jarndyce and Tulkinghorn, there is a striking similarity in their mode of action: each works secretly and in a sense "gently," quietly allowing the force of his own character, rather than any particularly overt action, to shape events. Mr. Tulkinghorn doesn't actually reveal Lady Dedlock's secret; he only threatens to, and that not explicitly. And Mr. Jarndyce avoids active involvement whenever at all possible. We see this resistance to action in at least four ways: his refusal to take part in the Chancery suit, his reluctance to dictate to Richard, his tolerance of Harold Skimpole, and his secret philanthropies. This withdrawal becomes literal when Mr. Jarndyce retreats to his "Growlery." The physical removal that characterizes his response to difficulty is one of the marks of Dickens's gentle hero.

If the parent-child relation dominates the intimate action of the novel, the Chancery suit defines the public,

social action. Like the fog that touches everything in London with its sooty fingers and seems in "mourning...for the death of the sun," the Court of Chancery engulfs the lives of everyone who comes near it in "new deposits [of] crust upon crust of mud, sticking...to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest" (BH 1). Dickens's famous metaphor for Chancery--a dark polluted fog--is like the lawyer Tulkinghorn, that creature of secrets and shadows. Mr. Jarndyce and Tulkinghorn never meet, and they represent opposite poles of human character. Tulkinghorn is heavily implicated in Chancery and uses its complications and delays to his own advantage. Mr. Jarndyce refuses to be drawn in. True, the east wind, which might blow a bit of that fog his way, does sometimes ruffle Mr. Jarndyce's equilibrium, but for the most part the Chancery suit doesn't touch him, at least not directly, because he refuses to listen to its siren's song.

Newly arrived at Bleak House, Esther acquaints herself with Mr. Jarndyce and his ways, one of which is his habitual retreat to his "Growlery." "When I am out of humour, I come and growl here," he tells her. "When I am deceived or disappointed in--the wind, and it's Easterly, I take refuge here." One of the strongest east winds (an ill wind, to be sure) blows from the direction of Chancery, which Jarndyce tries to explain to Esther.

It's about a Will, and the trusts under a Will--or it was once. It's about nothing but costs now....the legatees under the Will are reduced to such a miserable condition that they would be sufficiently punished, if they had committed an enormous crime in having money left them, and the Will itself is made a dead letter...[The suit is] nonsense and corruption....And thus, through years and years, and lives and lives, everything goes on, constantly beginning over and over again, and nothing ever ends. (BH 73)

When his cousin Richard succumbs to the family obsession with the suit, Mr. Jarndyce expresses himself with uncharacteristic vehemence.

'Rick Rick!' cried my guardian, with a sudden terror in his manner, and in an altered voice, and putting up his hands as if he would have stopped his ears, 'for the love of God, don't found a hope or expectation on the family curse! Whatever you do on this side of the grave, never give one lingering glance towards the horrible phantom that has haunted us so many years. Better to borrow, better to beg, better to die!' We were all startled by the fervour of this warning. (BH 258)

Many pages later, Jarndyce explains his withdrawal from the world of lawyers and wills. He tells the detective Bucket, "I abstain from examining this paper [a final copy of the will] myself. The plain truth is, I have forsworn and abjured the whole business these many years, and my soul is sick of it" (BH 637). A traditional hero might fling back the doors of Chancery and demand justice; the gentle hero leaves that world more or less alone and keeps himself above the fray.

In pursuing the suit, Richard is forced to reject not only Jarndyce's assessment of the business but Mr. Jarndyce as well. A rift grows between them, but Richard continues to make feeble attempts to implicate the older man.

'If I have the misfortune to be under that influence,' he says, 'so has he. If it has a little twisted me, it may have a little twisted him, too. I don't say that he is not an honorable man out of all this complication and uncertainty; I am sure he is, but it taints everybody. You know it taints everybody. You have heard him say so fifty times. Then why should he escape?'

'Because,' said [Esther, defining one aspect of the gentle hero], 'his is an uncommon character, and he has resolutely kept himself outside the circle, Richard.' (BH 398)

There is, of course, justice in Richard's claims. There is, or was, an inheritance to which he has a right. He is not wrong to claim his due, but he is unwise in protracting a battle with such an implacable foe as Chancery. Dickens often seems to want to have it both ways: first, he arouses our indignation at some palpable evil (slums, hospitals for the poor, Chancery), then he demonstrates the folly of allowing that indignation to procede unchecked. Those who persist end up mad, like Miss Flite, or dead, like Gridley.

Gridley, "the man from Shropshire," is another familiar face around the courts of Chancery and stands in contrast

to the gentle heroism of Mr. Jarndyce. Like the Jarndyce suit, Gridley's case has been made a horror. "I am not polite, I know," he tells Mr. Jarndyce. "I have been dragged for five-and-twenty years over burning iron, and I have lost the habit of treading on velvet" (BH 162). If Rick uses attempts at logic and persistence to try to understand the ins and outs of the Jarndyce suit, Gridley takes a more direct approach. He is angry; he is indignant; he is explosive with rage. In this he is a marked contrast to the gentle hero, Mr. Jarndyce.

[Y]ou bear your wrongs more quietly than I can bear mine...if I took my wrongs in any other way, I should be driven mad! It is only by resenting them, and by revenging them in my mind, and by angrily demanding the justice I never get that I am able to keep my wits together....If I was once to sit down under it, I should become imbecile. (BH 163)

Gridley, once a "good-enough-tempered man" (BH 164), has been tried out of all patience by his suit. His rages and threats have landed him in prison on several occasions, and in the end his anger sputters out uselessly and he dies.

A traditional hero is like Gridley in that he might confront the impassive faces of the lawyers and the High Chancellor; he might demand not only justice but the right to fight for it. Dickens is as enraged as anyone by the abuses of social institutions like Chancery, yet his gentle

hero makes no attempt to ameliorate their effects. He retires from the field, not to fight another day, but not to fight at all. Perhaps discretion is the better part of valour, or perhaps Dickens is saying that the blessings one confers on those gathered around his own hearth are, in the end, the ones that really count. Even justice seems to pale before the desire for domestic tranquility. It has been said that Dickens had to have the house clean and the kids quiet before he could write. With nine children this must have been something of a feat (Kaplan 222).

Dickens hungered for a domestic ideal that he seldom achieved in his life and, in fact, rarely described in his fiction. According to Michael Slater, "While the domestic ideal and a conception of woman as naturally domestic...is central and basic to Dickens's art, actual presentations or dramatizations of the ideal account for very few pages in his books" (335). Significantly, the most notable exception to this pattern of omission is Bleak House after Esther's arrival. Once the domestic scene is complete with a good woman, the gentle heroism of Mr. Jarndyce is at last brought into play, without fanfare or force, with a forbearance that seems at times superhuman--or perhaps occasionally even a little stupid.

Dickens condemns the madness that attends a heightened sense of injustice even more than the impersonal, remorseless source of that injustice. If this seems contradictory, let us remember that, for Dickens, the truly moral life was the personal, private one of the gentle hero. His apparently ambiguous moral stance may seem paradoxical and problematic, but Dickens, who was a fantasist in so many ways, is a realist here. There is, he sees, far more actual good to be accomplished by the Snagsbys and Mr. Georges of this world than by all the Mrs. Jellybys put together. When Mr. Snagsby slips the outcast Jo some food or Mr. George provides a home for the badly damaged little man Phil Squod, something tangible has been done. Rage against the system, if you must, Dickens seems to say, but don't let the child in your street go hungry. The gentle hero knows where he can do real good. In the end, his withdrawal from the public arena displays the pragmatism of the realist, not a lack of courage or character.

Mr. Jarndyce's Passivity in Personal Relations

Not only does Mr. Jarndyce remain as far from Chancery as he can, he also displays considerable restraint in his relations with Richard Carstone, demonstrating a withdrawal

from active engagement in private as well as public concerns. He goes so far as to give good advice, but when he sees that sound counsel has little effect, he stands aside.

Like so many before him, the pathetic Richard exhausts himself in the attempt to redress the very real wrongs done to him. Because he is so distracted by the Chancery suit, he is unable to attend profitably to the pursuit of an honest career. Part of the blame for this Dickens lays at the feet of the educational system. Dickens, of course, grew up far from the spires of Eton, but he was very active, with his friend Angela Burdett Coutts, in supporting schools for poor children in the belief that education was the major preventive of adolescent crime (Kaplan 146-49).

Richard has been to Winchester, a school that was supposed to prepare young men for an active practical career, even more so than Eton or Harrow. But his education has been for nought. Esther wonders what all that schooling was for if it wasn't to fit a man to live productively in the world.

I [Esther] thought it much to be regretted that Richard's education had not...directed his character. He had been eight years at a public school, and had learnt, I understood, to make Latin Verses of several sorts, in the most admirable manner. But I have not heard that it had been anybody's business to find out what his natural bent was, or where his failings

lay, or to adapt any kind of knowledge to him. (BH 127)

Richard knows he doesn't want to take holy orders; beyond that the choice of a career is a "toss-up." After casting about for a little, he decides, rather casually, that he will become a surgeon, that is to say a medical doctor. His enthusiasm for this idea is not entirely convincing, but it does provide a plan.

[T]he more he thought of it, the more he felt that his destiny was clear; the art of healing was the art of all others for him. Mistrusting that he only came to this conclusion, because, having never had much chance of finding out for himself what he was fitted for, and having never been guided to the discovery, he was taken by the newest idea, and was glad to get rid of the trouble of consideration, I [Esther] wondered whether the Latin Verses often ended in this, or whether Richard's was a solitary case. (BH 128)

If Esther, loyal and loving to a fault, can see reason to question Richard's characteristic indecision, why then does Mr. Jarndyce, so much more worldly than his ward but still the novel's gentle hero, find ways to excuse him? The reason lies, at least partly, in the Chancery suit. Mr. Jarndyce says,

'How much of this indecision of character...is chargeable on that heap of uncertainty and procrastination on which he has been thrown from his birth, I don't pretend to say; but that Chancery...is responsible for some of it, I can plainly see....The character of much older and steadier people may be changed by the circumstances surrounding them. It

would be too much to expect that a boy's, in its formation, should be the subject of such influences, and escape them.' (BH 127)

But much of Richard's difficulty lies in his own monomania, which is, after all, an additional choice he makes. All the evidence is there to demonstrate the terrible quagmire that Chancery is: old Tom Jarndyce's suicide, Miss Flite's madness, Gridley's impotent rages and distorted life. And still Richard persists, presenting the book's gentle hero, Mr. Jarndyce, with a serious problem.

Part of the gentle hero's function is to give wise counsel; we have seen this already with Dobbin and George Osborne in Vanity Fair. But beyond giving advice the gentle hero does not go. As with Newman's definition of a gentleman as one who leaves others free to act without constraint, so too Dickens's gentle hero maintains a steady reserve, not when it comes to speaking his mind, but certainly when it comes to allowing others to act, even if they act badly. "I have no power over you whatever," Mr. Jarndyce tells Richard. "But I wish and hope to retain your confidence, if I do nothing to forfeit it" (BH 137).

Mr. Jarndyce encourages Richard's medical studies with Bayham Badger. When that fails, the ever tolerant gentle hero helps Rick get a place with Carboy and Kenge, so he can study law. This proves disastrous, as it only

puts Richard closer to the machinations of Chancery, and his mental health begins to fail. Finally, he tries the army. He purchases a commission in the Horse Guards and goes off to live in barracks, but not before becoming engaged to Ada, who is also a claimant in the suit. Initially, Mr. Jarndyce is pleased by the engagement, but when it becomes obvious that Rick is in danger of pulling Ada down with him, Mr. Jarndyce, as tactfully as he can, advises them to set aside their promises to each other and let a little time go by.

'How I hoped you would begin, and how go on, I told you when we spoke of these things last,' said Mr. Jarndyce, in a cordial and encouraging manner. 'You have not made that beginning yet; but there is a time for all things, and yours is not gone by--rather, it is just now fully come. Make a clear beginning altogether.' (BH 258)

While the gentle hero realizes his full moral potential in his attachment to a good woman (or a woman whom he believes to be good), that is not to say that all men can achieve moral greatness or that all women are capable of evoking gentle heroism. Ada certainly does nothing to develop Richard's moral character, despite Esther's rhapsodies about her. Beauty, freshness, and youth are not enough. A woman must possess a spiritual nature sufficient to inspire the man who loves her, and the gentle hero must be one who can respond to feminine virtue when

it is revealed to him. Ada and Richard provide a neat contrast to Mr. Jarndyce and Esther, for they show the mutual interdependence--or lack of it--between men and women in the actualization of their moral selves.

Although at the time of writing Bleak House Dickens was not yet faced with launching his own seven sons upon careers (an enterprise that was to cause him much trouble), he captures perfectly the mix of hope and anxiety parents, or parent substitutes, feel when dealing with an intelligent, but feckless, offspring. After defending Richard and assuring Ada that he is not angry with him--"I should be more disposed to quarrel with myself, than with poor Rick" (BH 178)--Mr. Jarndyce nevertheless lets a bit of his uneasiness show.

This was the first time I ever saw him follow Ada with his eyes, with something of a shadow on their benevolent expression....it was but a very little while since he had watched them passing down the room in which the sun was shining, and away into the shade; but his glance was changed, and even the silent look of confidence in me which now followed it once more, was not quite so hopeful and untroubled as it had originally been. (BH 179)

Things don't improve, but beyond advising breaking off the engagement, Mr. Jarndyce says little:... "my guardian, though he frequently complained of the east wind and read more than usual in the Growlery, preserved a strict silence on the subject" (BH 244). Even after long,

fruitless talks with Richard, ..."my guardian, though he underwent considerable inconvenience from the state of the wind, and rubbed his head so constantly that not a single hair upon it ever rested in its rightful place, was as genial with Ada and me as at any other time, but maintained a steady reserve on these matters" (BH 256).

Richard cannot see that Mr. Jarndyce is trying to help him any more than he can see the pitfalls of Chancery, but Mr. Jarndyce continues in his kindly way to try to draw Rick back from the edge. The gentle hero does not hold grudges; he does not sulk or become defensive when he fails to get his own way; he withholds words that might be hurtful, even though they are true. It is all an amazing demonstration of tact, of forbearance, ultimately of charity on the part of Mr. Jarndyce, who senses the futility of continuing to harangue Richard for a character fault he has lost the will to correct. To do so would only add to Richard's misery. The gentle hero knows he cannot force others to be happy or wise, but he does not abandon them for all that.

Even after Mr. Jarndyce and Richard become estranged and Richard turns against his old friend, Mr. Jarndyce refuses to criticize him.

'He is not to blame,' [says Jarndyce]. 'Jarndyce and Jarndyce has warped him out of himself, and perverted me in his eyes. I have known it to do as bad deeds,

and worse, many a time. If two angels could be concerned in it, I believe it would change their nature.'

'It has not changed yours, Guardian.'

'Oh yes, it has, my dear,' he said laughingly.

'It has made the south wind, easterly, I don't know how often.' (BH 373)

Mr. Jarndyce would rather restore Richard's better nature than inherit any amount of money, but "Chancery's transcendent wickedness" makes that impossible. "His blood is infected," says Mr. Jarndyce, "It is not his fault....we must be patient with poor Rick, and not blame him" (BH 373). Experience is not enough to show Richard his error, says Mr. Jarndyce. Men far older and wiser have been dragged down; who can blame a hopeful youth for faltering where so many others have failed?

Mr. Jarndyce's repeated defenses of Richard because of his youth, inexperience, and misperception display the gentle hero's God-like benevolence. It would perhaps strain a symbolic reading of this novel too far to deify Mr. Jarndyce, but there is something saintly about his preternatural ability to forgive and excuse. And there is something close to the idea of original sin about the infection of Jarndyce and Jarndyce that passes from one generation to the next. Although Dickens does not drag Christianity into his novel with any greater force than many other major Victorian novelists, there still remains

a Christian subtext to the moral structure of the book. (His satire on the unctuous Rev. Chadband and his frosty wife only points up the meaning of true Christian morality.) Mr. Jarndyce's Christ-like attributes may be mostly implicit rather than explicit, but clearly Dickens sees in Mr. Jarndyce a holy figure who, though unable to prevent tragedy, nevertheless embodies the proper response to ubiquitous evil. Like Christ, Mr. Jarndyce often withdraws from an evil world--if not into the desert or the Garden of Gethsemane, then into his Growlery where, in effect, he meditates.

Richard, lacking the qualities of the gentle hero, is like a guilty sinner who blames God for what is really his fault--or the fault of a fallen world. Richard becomes estranged from Mr. Jarndyce the way a sinner turns from God. "If any man had told me, when I first went to John Jarndyce's house, that he was anything but the disinterested friend he seemed...I could have found no words strong enough to repel the slander," says Richard. But his knowledge of the world, as it appears to him, leads him to hold Mr. Jarndyce responsible for his sufferings. "[H]e becomes to me the embodiment of the suit;...in place of its being an abstraction, it is John Jarndyce;...the more I suffer, the more indignant I am with him;...every new delay, and

every new disappointment, is only a new injury from John Jarndyce's hand" (BH 419).

Mr. Jarndyce doesn't blame Richard, doesn't try to dictate to him, doesn't get angry or lose patience. Ever the gentle hero, he uses quiet ways to try to set Richard straight, with no thought to enhancing his own reputation or proving a point at Richard's expense. Esther says, "We knew afterwards what we suspected then....That he had written to him, gone to him, talked with him, tried every gentle and persuasive art his kindness could devise" (BH 449). But Jarndyce makes no overt move to influence Richard, commits no act that would expose Rick to the censure of others.

Even after Richard and Ada's marriage, Mr. Jarndyce continues to exculpate him. Though, as Esther points out, it is unreasonable for Richard to blame his cousin, Mr. Jarndyce declares, "What shall we find reasonable in Jarndyce and Jarndyce! Unreason and injustice at the top,...at the heart and at the bottom,...from beginning to end...how should poor Rick...pluck reason out of it? He no more gathers grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles, than older men did, in old times" (BH 616).

Mr. Jarndyce seems--like Christ--to be of the world, yet somehow not in it. He remains apart--in the Growlery that is a kind of Gethsemane, wrapped up in heavy cloaks

the first time he meets Esther, beyond the reaches of Chancery. He dispenses warmth and "brightness," like a sun or a God, without himself becoming implicated in the dense textures of human life. He is good, but he is removed--not unlike other gentle heroes in English literature, even to the present day: Inspector Dalglish or Chief Inspector Morse of mystery story fame, for example. When Richard dies, in typical dramatic Dickens fashion, Mr. Jarndyce stands in the hall outside the death-chamber until Richard bids him come in. In a final act of reconciliation--the sinner getting right with God--Richard softens. "'Oh, Sir,' said Richard, 'you are a good man, you are a good man!' and burst into tears for the first time" (BH 658).

Ironically, Richard dies just as the suit is finally settled by the discovery of a definitive will. But it is not justice in this world that brings him liberty; death is the only release, ie., "The world that sets this right" (BH 659). As Richard lies dying, Miss Flite, another of Chancery's victims, at last releases, as she had promised to do upon settlement of the suit, her vast collection of birds, with names like "Youth," "Hope," and "Beauty." But the birds are doomed, for their captivity, like the humans' captivity in Chancery, has removed their natural defenses, and Lady Jane, Krook's sly and cunning cat, whose

"natural cruelty is sharpened by a jealous fear of their regaining their liberty," (BH 43), is only waiting, like a wolf at the door, for a chance to get at them. Mr. Jarndyce, the gentle hero, has kept free all along and has in this life what those who attach themselves to evil can find only in death. Thus, the gentle hero may sacrifice justice or personal satisfaction, but he retains a hold on life that those who are more bold or more foolish may forfeit.

The traditional literary hero, like Robin Hood, say, or Sherlock Holmes, exists to put things right, to restore order, to give victims another chance. But the gentle hero does not restore order; he only cares for those he loves when they become the pawns of fortune. When it is all over, no one can say that Mr. Jarndyce has the least effect on Richard, and yet it is clear that the young man is Mr. Jarndyce's beneficiary all the same.

Mr. Jarndyce and the Impossible Mr. Skimpole:
The Tolerance of the Gentle Hero

Throughout Bleak House the sterling character of Mr. Jarndyce is played off against various other, less gentle types. Richard is an example not only of callow youth but also of anyone who allows an obsession to rule his life. Fanatics of all kinds fall into this category, from

Mrs. Jellyby and her African missions to Mr. Turveydrop, the "model of Deportment." Such fanaticism, whether self-interested or in the service of a worthy cause, is pernicious and unknown in the gentle hero. It damages the fanatic, who is unaware of his own destruction, and it ruins the lives of those around him, who are powerless to make a dent in his monomania.

Tulkinghorn represents another kind of opposition to Jarndyce--the simmering stew of evil. He uses his formidable intelligence and impeccable social connections to hurt others, not just because it will profit him but because he seems to enjoy watching others squirm within his power. He is the corruption of power, for as a lawyer and representative of the Court of Chancery, he has the whole weight of the British judicial system behind him. He shows what happens, Dickens seems to say, when any institution creates an opening for opportunists and schemers, the sort of "opportunity" the gentle hero assiduously avoids. Tulkinghorn provides an individual embodiment of what is essentially a social issue. Institutions become weighty monuments to their own existence, and there is always the danger that someone with malignant intentions will be able to throw not only his own weight but also the mass of the institution upon his victim.

But there is an even worse antagonist to Mr. Jarndyce than Tulkinghorn: Harold Skimpole, who is, in fact, the worst villain--if we can apply such a term to a man who does absolutely nothing--in the novel. (Perhaps we might call him a gentle villain.) Here again we see Dickens's overriding preoccupation with personal relations. Jarndyce has no commerce with Tulkinghorn, who is part of the Dedlock plot and has only a tangential relation to the Esther plot, just as he, Jarndyce, has nothing to do with Chancery. Beyond the fact that there is really no way and no reason for Tulkinghorn to get at Mr. Jarndyce, the truth is that in keeping clear of Chancery Mr. Jarndyce keeps clear of men like Tulkinghorn.

He does not keep clear of Skimpole, however. Indeed, he takes Skimpole into his home, pays his debts, and supports his family. Their relationship raises important questions about the gentle hero in Dickens. Why does Mr. Jarndyce allow himself to be used in this way? Why is he so tolerant of Skimpole's irresponsibility and so disturbed by Richard's? What is the nature of the evil Skimpole represents, and how is Mr. Jarndyce's reaction to it typical of the gentle hero?

The answer to the first question is easy: the gentle hero generally is used by others, who take his generosity and kindness for granted. We have seen how Amelia and

George use Dobbin in Vanity Fair, in both trivial and important ways, and no one in Hayslope gives much thought to the help Seth Bede provides the community. Everything Mr. Jarndyce does, from providing for Esther to taking in his young cousins to buying a house for Woodcourt and Esther, is calculated to serve the interests of others. But with Skimpole there is a difference. Generally we have seen how the gentle hero helps those who are themselves essentially good and deserving of our sympathy. Thackeray's Amelia may be a little fool much of the time, but she is undeniably well-intentioned. George Eliot's Lisbeth Bede may be somewhat querulous and overly partial to her elder son, but she is a kindly mother for all that. Skimpole, however, is positively, irredeemably, nauseatingly undeserving.

A large measure of Dickens's power of characterization, as well as his capacity for moral irony, is demonstrated in the character of Harold Skimpole, who was, though Dickens tried to deny it, apparently modelled on n'er-do-well painter-poet Leigh Hunt. (When Hunt died in 1859, his obituary alluded to his identification with Skimpole, forcing Dickens, rather unconvincingly, to disclaim the connection in an article in Household Words (Kaplan 315-16).) The complexity of the characterization arises from the juxtaposition of conflicting qualities that should

cancel each other out but don't. The result is an unresolved paradox that points straight to the heart of Dickens's moral position and the nature of his gentle hero.

The central paradox is Skimpole's existence as child and father simultaneously. When Esther, Ada, and Richard first arrive at Bleak House, they find another guest already ensconced: Harold Skimpole. Mr. Jarndyce tells his young visitors, "There's no one here but the finest creature upon earth--a child....I don't mean literally a child...not a child in years. He is grown up--he is at least as old as I am [that is to say, around sixty]--but in simplicity, and freshness, and enthusiasm, and a fine guileless inaptitude for all worldly affairs, he is a perfect child" (BH 51).

Dickens's own attitude toward children was problematic. On the one hand, he was extraordinarily compassionate toward suffering children and did more, perhaps, than any other English writer to make children not just peripheral, but central, to his fiction. (Compare Dickens's treatment of Jo to Thackeray's treatment of Becky's and Amelia's sons.) His empathy for Oliver Twist or young David Copperfield obviously derives from the blight on his own childhood: in particular, his time spent pasting labels on bottles in a shoe-blackening factory. He had felt abandoned by his parents, who were forced by their own

financial irresponsibility to send their twelve-year-old son out to work, and he was cheated of the kind of education he felt he needed and deserved. It had been such a bitter time for him that he never spoke of it, even to his own children, until very late in life (Kaplan 41-43).

In addition to his seemingly boundless sympathy for the plight of suffering children, Dickens also valued the childish imagination. He loved to play games and mount theatricals with his own children and the children of his friends, though he was apt to take over their management himself, rather than allowing the children to do things their way. He loved childish fancy, as we see in Hard Times, where the schoolmaster Mr. Gradgrind wants to stick to the facts, while little Sissy wants to tell of circuses and ladies in pretty tights. In Dickens's view, art is important to the spirit of life, just as practicality is necessary to its continuance. One is not to be preferred to the other, but with Mr. Gradgrind and Harold Skimpole we see examples of the two extremes.

Skimpole is all art (not very good art, to be sure, but art nonetheless). "He is a musical man," says Mr. Jarndyce, "an Amateur, but might have been a Professional. He is an Artist, too; an Amateur, but might have been a Professional....He has been unfortunate in his affairs, and unfortunate in his pursuits, and unfortunate in his

family, but he don't care--he's a child!" (BH 51).

Skimpole's lack of care has nothing in common with Dickens's concern for children in trouble. Dickens felt sorry for the neglected child he himself had been, and his own suffering made him a life-long champion of beleaguered children. But he sometimes found it easier to extend that sympathy in fiction than in reality, though the childish Skimpole for good reasons gets none. He had nine children in rapid succession, and while he worked hard to provide responsibly for them and took a deep interest in their lives, their sheer numbers overwhelmed him. The strain of so much family life turned him prematurely old and caused him to complain on many occasions of the size of his family and the pressure of their demands on him.

Unlike his own father, he took care of his children, but something deep inside him must have found caring for so many of them rather like being a put-upon child again himself. To make matters worse, his father, John Dickens, never left off needing financial help and often used his famous son's name to borrow money, causing Dickens much embarrassment. "I am amazed and confounded by the audacity of his ungratitude," wrote Dickens in 1843. "He and all of them [the rest of his family], look upon me as something to be plucked and torn to pieces for their advantage.

They have no idea, and no care for, my existence in any other light. My soul sickens at the thought of them....They are...such a drag-chain on my life, that for the time they utterly dispirit me, and weigh me down" (Kaplan 158).

It must often have seemed unfair to Dickens that the child whom no one thought to take much care of grew up to be a man on whom so many depended. In some ways, then, Dickens must have envied Skimpole's absolute freedom. Skimpole "had no idea of time...[and] he had no idea of money. In consequence of which he never kept an appointment, never could transact any business, and never knew the value of anything!" Still, he enjoys sketching, reading, and nature. "All he asked of society was, to let him live" (BH 53). This becomes his cri de coeur, a claim upon the charity of others that he regards as absolute.

Skimpole's suspect gusto appeals to Mr. Jarndyce, but when Richard asks about Skimpole's dozen children, Mr. Jarndyce, "his countenance suddenly falling," says, Skimpole "has never looked after them. How could he? He wanted somebody to look after him. He is a child, you know!" The Skimpole children "have tumbled up somehow or other," a reflection that sends a sudden chill over Mr. Jarndyce: "The wind's getting round again, I am afraid. I feel it rather!" (BH 52).

Mr. Jarndyce continues, however, to provide for Skimpole --and for Skimpole's family, taking on the role of father to all of them. There is more than a little of Dickens himself in Mr. Jarndyce, and the paternal indulgence he shows to a man whose own paternal failure is so complete shows how Dickens felt about it--or perhaps wishes he did. Although Skimpole sponges off all his friends, Mr. Jarndyce is his mainstay and chief victim. And though the wind may often be from the east, Jarndyce never utters a word of complaint against the man whose moral apparatus is so defective he can see nothing except as it relates to himself and whose obtuseness is so complete that no appeal to his logic, compassion, or gratitude comes close to touching him. Skimpole exists to give others the pleasure of helping him; children could be starving (as the Coavinses children are), and he could contrive to find not only a way to remain unconcerned but also some means of getting something good out of the misfortune for himself. He is a genius at turning morality upside down.

I envy you your power of doing what you do, [Skimpole tells the other inhabitants of Bleak House]. It is what I should revel in myself. I don't feel any vulgar gratitude to you. I almost feel as if you ought to be grateful to me, for giving you the opportunity of enjoying the luxury of generosity. (BH 54)

Skimpole goes on in this vein for some time, concluding that his main purpose in life is to make others feel good

by giving them the chance "of assisting me in my little perplexities." This absurd speech pleases Mr. Jarndyce no end: "it was really singular...that he [Jarndyce], who was probably the most grateful of mankind upon the least occasion, should so desire to escape the gratitude of others" (BH 54). He has little to fear on that score from Skimpole. When Skimpole admires Ada's golden hair and youthful beauty, saying, "She is the child of the universe [like himself]," Jarndyce, "with an attentive smile upon his face," says, "The universe makes rather an indifferent parent, I am afraid" (BH 55). Jarndyce may find Skimpole charming, and as a gentle hero he accepts Skimpole for what that human failure cannot, or will not, help being, but he knows that being a good parent requires more than vague sentiments and aesthetical vapors.

Skimpole's resolute irresponsibility is nothing less than maddening. We long for someone to pull him up short and make him realize that for everything anyone has someone has to pay. We ache for him to recognize his failure and to at least try to do something about it. Why doesn't Mr. Jarndyce share these feelings? The answer lies in the nature of Dickens's gentle hero, a character without ego, or, more accurately, without egotism. Skimpole's egotism, on the other hand, is all-encompassing. It blinds him to everything but his own immediate pleasures. Our

response to him derives from our own egotism, our own sense that we would not want someone else sailing along comfortably, while we huffed and puffed to keep his sails filled. There is justice in this response, but not mercy. Mr. Jarndyce, absolutely moral, absolutely forgiving, absolutely generous, transcends the rough justice of the marketplace to embody a higher morality than even Dickens himself could display. Mr. Jarndyce does easily what Dickens often did grudgingly and what most of us would never do at all; even so, his gentle tolerance can seem almost like masochism if pushed too far.

Because Skimpole is a "child," he cannot be held responsible, according to Mr. Jarndyce. "You can't make him responsible. The idea of Harold Skimpole with designs or plans, or knowledge of consequences! Ha, ha, ha!" (BH 60). But Skimpole is, as Esther points out, not like other people. If he really were a child, he would be justified in being irresponsible and in need of care. But he is a man, and while Mr. Jarndyce can forgive him, neither we nor Dickens can. The gentle hero, then, is an ideal that few can measure up to and, from a worldly point of view, something of a patsy and dupe. Like Dobbin and especially like Seth Bede, Mr. Jarndyce is otherworldly in his goodness. He is, like them, in some ways a martyr, though the faith he suffers for is not institutional dogma

but an all-embracing human solidarity, for we can all participate in the human community by following the gentle hero even part of the way.

The idea of responsibility is crucial to Dickens's gentle hero, but it is tangled up with notions of love and tolerance--quite a victory when you consider how much reason Dickens had to resent the impositions of his parents and siblings over the years. Dickens's gentle hero may be able to love fools and excuse their waywardness, but he does not expect a quid pro quo. He assumes responsibility for those in his care--whatever form that may take--without necessarily expecting others to act as he does. But despite Mr. Jarndyce's tolerance of Skimpole, Dickens leaves no doubt as to how we should judge this child-man. He is a social parasite and a moral cipher, in his own obtuse and airy way even more corrupt than Tulkinghorn, who at least seems conscious of what he is doing. There is, Dickens seems to say, in Skimpole and those like him a corruption in the kind of innocence that refuses to take the world as it is. The gentle hero is a kind of innocent too, but not like Skimpole and not at the expense of others.

In Mr. Jarndyce we see an example of how the gentle hero can sometimes demonstrate less-than-perfect judgment. In a way, Mr. Jarndyce's own innocence leaves him prey

to Skimpole's importunities, unable to see Skimpole's faults as truly damnable, unwilling to take steps to free himself from this "drag-chain" (Dickens's term for his own Micawberesque father). No, the gentle hero is not perfect, and sometimes his own nature enables others to behave foolishly. He may be a standard of value, but that does not necessarily mean that he never makes mistakes. Dickens's moral realism is evident in Mr. Jarndyce, a gentle hero who demonstrates the limits of virtue.

This brings us to another of Dickens's paradoxes, or antitheses, one highlighted in his scornful treatment of Skimpole. On the one hand Dickens values the imagination. A writer of more fecund imagination would be difficult to find. Even so, he never loses sight of that part of the world that cannot escape into lofty realms of art or aesthetic pleasure. Contrast the bricklayers of Bleak House and their families, moving from place to place amidst violence, poverty, and death, with Skimpole, drifting from friend to friend, his head in a cloud of airy nonsense. "Harold Skimpole loves to see the sun shine, loves to hear the wind blow; loves to watch the changing lights and shadows; loves to hear the birds [light, shadow, and birds are all recurrent symbols in Bleak House, representing variations on the ideas of liberty and confinement], those choristers in Nature's great cathedral,"

says Skimpole to the man who wants to arrest him for debt (BH 59). What made Skimpole so irresponsible, Esther wants to know. "Why," says Mr. Jarndyce,

... 'he is all sentiment, and--susceptibility, and--and--sensibility--and--and imagination. And these qualities are not regulated in him, somehow. I suppose the people who admired him for them in his youth, attached too much importance to them, and too little to any training that would have balanced and adjusted them; and so he became what he is.' (BH 449)

In fact, the gentle hero is not overly imaginative in any of his incarnations. He may be transported by romance, like Dobbin as a boy, but he is not what we might call "creative." In a way, he is too sincere for that. He may be an ideal to us, but in himself he is a realist. So it is that Mr. Jarndyce can appreciate Skimpole's fancies but can never participate in them.

The corollary of properly exercised responsibility is gratitude on the part of others, but Mr. Jarndyce wants none. Dickens may have chafed against the apparent ingratitude of his family, but Mr. Jarndyce neither seeks nor needs expressions of thanks. He gets none from Skimpole. When Skimpole dies five years after Richard, he leaves behind diaries and letters that are eventually published. The book makes "very pleasant reading," according to general opinion, but it presents its author as "the victim of a combination on the part of mankind

against an amiable child" and Mr. Jarndyce as "the Incarnation of Selfishness" (BH 629).

Too much imagination of the wrong kind, too little responsibility: these are Skimpole's faults, and while they might not be as grievous as Tulkinghorn's insinuating schemes or Hortense's murderous fury, they are twin evils that infect a far larger part of the world. It is possible that in his treatment of Skimpole Dickens was exorcising some of his own bitterness toward the spongers who troubled his life. And yet Jarndyce forgives, and in his character the Christian charity of the gentle hero is not sacrificed to Old Testament justice.

The Anonymous Charity of the Gentle Hero

In addition to his avoidance of Chancery, his patience with Richard, and his tolerance of Skimpole, Mr. Jarndyce reveals himself as a gentle hero by his secret philanthropies both to Esther, whom he comes to love, and to many others who drift within his orbit. There are many characters who demonstrate charity in Bleak House, but none who do so in the consistently secretive way Mr. Jarndyce does. Indeed, he has an abhorrence of expressions of gratitude, indicating the characteristic shyness of the gentle hero, as well as a desire to stick to the

practical and helpful rather than indulging in the sentimental. (In Bleak House Dickens leaves the sentiment to Esther.) Ada tells Esther that Mr. Jarndyce had performed many kindnesses for her mother in the past but

could never bear acknowledgments for any kindness he performed, and that, sooner than receive any he would resort to the most singular expedients and evasions, or would even run away. Ada dimly remembered to have heard her mother tell, when she was a very little child, that he had once done her an act of uncommon generosity, and that on her going to his house to thank him, he happened to see her through a window coming to the door, and immediately escaped by the back gate, and was not heard of for three months. (BH 47)

Later, when Esther and her two new friends, Ada and Richard, arrive at their benefactor's house and Mr. Jarndyce kisses them in "a fatherly way," Esther feels "that if we had been at all demonstrative, he would have run away in a moment." When she recognizes him as the man who had offered her the cake on the coach years earlier, she says, "I never was so frightened in my life as when I made the discovery, for he caught my glance, and appearing to read my thoughts, gave such a look at the door that I thought we had lost him" (BH 48).

A catalogue of Mr. Jarndyce's kindnesses can be run through rather quickly: he provides the unbalanced Miss Flite with enough income to keep her going, takes Jo in when the boy is desperate and ill, repeatedly arranges

things for Richard, secures a future for the children of the late Coavinses, secretly supports Skimpole's otherwise destitute family, and provides a home for Ada and her son after Richard's death. All these charitable acts are typical of the gentle hero, but the ones that count most, at least so far as his being a gentle hero is concerned, are the things he does for Esther. His relation to her is crucial to the function of Dickens's gentle hero, and it shows many of the same qualities we have seen already in Dobbin and Seth Bede.

The Gentle Hero and the Loss of the Beloved

Of all the roles the gentle hero plays, none is more important than that of the unsuccessful lover. Many things can account for the gentle hero's failure to win the woman he loves, though his own moral character is never to blame, but in the end his gracious standing aside in favor of another is his consummate act of generosity. In his dealings with all the characters in Bleak House Mr. Jarndyce is a gentle hero, but in his relationship with Esther we see just how costly the price of his virtue can be. Esther's position in life is severely compromised by her illegitimacy. Raised by an unfeeling aunt, appropriately named Miss Barbary, Esther has no idea who her parents

are and is only told that she was her mother's disgrace and must never expect anything for herself. As is typical in Dickens, the mistreatment she experiences in childhood only serves to make her generous to a fault, gaily sentimental, and self-abnegating in the extreme. Like Jo, the other child-victim in the novel, Esther is grateful to those who mistreat her, imputing to them the best motives, for she can imagine no others. "Mrs. Rachel," the woman who had helped her aunt look after her and who later turns up as the egregious Mrs. Chadband, "was too good to feel any emotion at parting [after Miss Barbary's death], but I was not so good, and wept bitterly" (BH 17).

Hearing of her plight, Mr. Jarndyce secretly arranges for Esther to go to a school where she can learn to be a governess. He makes sure she has a home to grow up in and some means of carrying on once she reaches adulthood. When Esther leaves her aunt's house for the last time, she takes with her a bird in a cage, one of the first of many images of imprisoned fowl in the novel. Here, as elsewhere, the caged bird represents some confinement, some restriction upon the character connected with it. (Skimpole, who listens to birds sing out-of-doors, admits no restrictions of any kind.) So long as Esther lives under the cloud of her mother's secret, her way is barred toward a normal life and she stands in need of rescue by

a gentle hero. Through Mr. Jarndyce's intercessions, she is released, first to school, then to Bleak House, and finally to a new Bleak House of her own.

On the coach with Esther, as she leaves for her new school, is a gentleman who "looked very large in a quantity of wrappings; but he sat gazing out of the other window, and took no notice of me" (BH 17), or so she thinks. From beneath his strange, heavy cloaks the mysterious gentleman suddenly demands to know why Esther is crying and why she doesn't want to go where she's going--he already knows her destination, of course, having arranged it himself. When Esther tells him about her aunt and Miss Rachel, the stranger (Mr. Jarndyce, of course) curses Miss Rachel and offers Esther a heavily iced slice of plum cake. Esther refuses it, as it is too rich for a child unused to such delicacies, whereupon Mr. Jarndyce throws it out the window.

The importance of food to Dickens was very great, for when he was a child at the blacking factory he never got enough to eat and would often fantasize about the steaming puddings and joints of meat he could not afford (Kaplan 42). An iced cake would, in his view, have been the perfect gift for a grieving child, and there is something especially poignant in Esther's not being able to enjoy it.

The full story of Mr. Jarndyce's great kindness to Esther is gradually revealed throughout the course of the novel; only in its last pages do we see the ultimate acts of love and generosity that begin on that chilly coach when Esther is a child. The relationship between Esther and Jarndyce develops slowly. In its initial stages he is her "Guardian." In fact, she never calls him anything else, even when he no longer holds that position. He fills the role of father to her--and to Richard and Ada. But it quickly becomes apparent to the reader, if not to Esther or even to Mr. Jarndyce, that there is more on Mr. Jarndyce's side than paternal interest.

Michael Slater notes that "Woman as wife seldom stirred Dickens's imagination unless she could be seen essentially in sisterly or daughterly terms in that role" (365). Esther and Jarndyce never marry, though they do have an intense and loving relationship. Slater has shown at length how Dickens valued the domestic above the erotic--in fiction, if not in life--and it is no wonder that his gentle hero should adopt the fatherly role.

Mr. Jarndyce secretly checks up on Esther over the years, making sure of her progress and welfare, seeing that she is loved and happy at her school. When he confesses this to Esther, she says, "she blesses the Guardian who is a Father to her." Her comment has a

disquieting effect. "At the word Father, I saw his former trouble come into his face. He subdued it as before, and it was gone in an instant; but it had been there, and it had come so swiftly upon my words that I felt as if they had given him a shock" (BH 181). A good example, this, of the gentle hero's swallowed emotion and reluctance to intrude his feelings upon a woman unprepared to receive them, but also an indication that Dickens knew he was flirting with the incestuous.

Having lived a bachelor for so long, Mr. Jarndyce is not easily persuaded to allow romantic love into his life, but Esther is so competent, so cheerful, so nice, that he comes to depend upon her very quickly and gives her the housekeeping keys to Bleak House almost as soon as she arrives. There is a deep domestic bond between them, with Mr. Jarndyce providing a home and financial support on the one hand and Esther providing the homely comforts and feminine graces the lonely old bachelor sorely needs on the other. Her housekeeping skills are, in fact, one of the chief indicators of Esther's virtue, for Dickens tended to equate domestic competence with ideal femininity. (He thought his wife Catherine hopeless in these matters.) According to Dickens, women should be educated to the task of running a household well--other accomplishments were superfluous and unnatural (Slater 323-24).

In Mr. Jarndyce and Esther we are reminded of the relationship between Dickens and two of his sisters-in-law. The first, Mary, came to live with the newlywed Dickenses, when she was fifteen, to serve as a servant and companion to her sister Catherine. Her sudden death in 1837 at seventeen plunged Dickens into a despair so profound that he never entirely got over it. Mary was a lively presence in the house, taking over when Catherine became depressed and ill after the birth of her first child. Dickens, who was to form a lifelong habit of loving women other than his wife, found Mary enchanting, a "sweet interesting creature" who ran the household and worshipped her brother-in-law. She died in Dickens's arms, and he was devastated (Kaplan 91-93). This relationship, so important to Dickens's emotional life, provided the basis for the gentle hero's paternal involvement with a young woman who is, in fact, something quite different from a daughter.

Dickens never had anything like a love affair with his young sister-in-law, but his affection for her was so deep, his attachment so profound, that after her death he wrote to her mother: "That pleasant smile and those sweet words which [were] bestowed upon an evening's work in our merry banterings round the fire were more precious to me than the applause of a whole world would be" (Forster 27). And in his diary seven months after her death he

wrote, she "sympathiz[ed] with all my thoughts and feelings more than anyone I knew ever did or will" (Forster 25).

He wanted to share Mary's grave, and when her brother George died four years later and was buried alongside his sister, Dickens was disconsolate: "I cannot bear the thought of being excluded from her dust....It seems like losing her a second time" (Dickensian 76, Slater 85).

But the sister who purportedly was the model for Esther was the second Hogarth sister to join the family, Georgina, slightly younger than Mary had been and just as capable. Dickens came to depend upon her utterly, and she stayed with him, despite a certain amount of scandal, when Dickens separated from his wife. There is no doubt that Dickens loved her, but, again, the evidence points toward an entirely domestic, brother-sister or father-daughter relationship between them--much like that between Mr. Jarndyce and Esther. In his will Dickens referred to Georgina as "The best and truest friend man ever had" (Slater 163); indeed, he drew his last conscious breath in her arms (Slater 164). Many critics have noted the parallels between Esther and Georgina, including efforts on the part of their benefactors to find them suitable husbands: Jarndyce succeeds where Dickens failed, perhaps through lack of real trying.

But whether or not Dickens was troubled by any sexual ambiguity in his relations with Georgina, it is clear that Mr. Jarndyce wants a wife, not just a housekeeper, at least until he comes to realize where Esther's heart really lies.

His approach to Esther is based on love, circumspection, generosity, and diffidence. It marks the final revelation of Mr. Jarndyce as a gentle hero, for in addition to those qualities of character that the gentle hero must possess, he also experiences the loss of the woman he loves. In most Victorian novels with a gentle hero, this is the ultimate test of his qualification for that role. Dispossession in love is the gentle hero's ultimate fate.

The true test of Mr. Jarndyce's love for Esther comes after her illness--most likely smallpox. It destroys her looks, causing the love-struck but conniving Guppy to hastily withdraw his unwelcome proposal of marriage. Esther sacrifices her quiet beauty in order to care for Jo, from whom she catches the illness, and though she grieves in private for her ruined face, she carries on as before, uncomplaining, loving, devoted to her little circle of friends. After looking in the mirror for the first time since becoming ill, she takes her maid Charley (one of Coavinses' orphans whom Mr. Jarndyce has rescued) in her arms and says, "It matters very little, Charley. I hope

I can do without my old face very well." Mr. Jarndyce comes to see her one morning soon after; "when he first came in, [he] could only hold me in his embrace, and say, 'My dear, dear girl!' I had long known--who could know better?--what a deep fountain of affection and generosity his heart was....I thought, 'He has seen me, and he loves me better than he did'" (BH 374). Dickens is careful to note that Esther continues to see Mr. Jarndyce in the light of a father: "He had supported me,...and his tenderness was so precious to me, that I leaned my head upon his shoulder and loved him as if he had been my father" (BH 374).

We can only speculate about Dickens's psychology when he insists so firmly on the depth of the father-daughter attachment. It seems fairly obvious that his own attitudes towards love of all kinds were rooted in what were, for him, the problematic relations with his own parents and, to a degree, with his own children. It was a father's (or a mother's) love that was the apotheosis of love, precisely because Dickens had never felt sure of it himself; romantic attachments in his fiction that do not have that as a base are often the least convincing, if superficially more normal. For whatever reason, the gentle hero in Dickens is a father-figure, never more so than when in love. Esther's overwhelming response is gratitude, which

in Dickens's world is often a more potent emotion than eros; while we have seen how uneasy Mr. Jarndyce is with gratitude, it nevertheless defines his relation to Esther. Perhaps it is one reason their relationship seems so lopsided.

According to Michael Slater,

Dickens's apparent nervousness about any manifestation of aggressive female passion...may be linked to an equally detectable nervousness about his own strong sexual responsiveness to women....The domestic setting as Dickens and his age idealized it--a haven of serenity and a spiritual powerhouse--could accommodate children and angels but not the turbulence and sensuous delights of sexuality. (356)

In fact, it is far less threatening for the gentle hero to hand over his beloved to another man than to engage in the messy complexities of sexual passion. We have seen what happens to one gentle hero--Dobbin--who does marry the woman he loves: he loses her as an ideal and is pushed into a sadness more poignant than that of Mr. Jarndyce or Seth Bede, failed suitors both.

Because she trusts him, Esther finally talks to Mr. Jarndyce about the secret of her illegitimacy:

He spoke so tenderly and wisely to me,...that, penetrated as I had been with fervent gratitude [if with nothing else] towards him through so many years, I believed I had never loved him so dearly, never thanked him in my heart so fully, as I did that night. And when he had taken me to my room and kissed me at the door, and when I at last lay down to sleep, my thought was how could I ever be busy enough, how

could I ever be good enough, how in my little way could I ever hope to be forgetful enough of myself, devoted enough to him, and useful enough to others, to show him how I blessed and honoured him. (BH 460)

"Household ornament, guardian angel, playful kitten, Good Sister, Good Provider"--these, according to Michael Slater, are the female types most congenial to Dickens, as to the Victorians generally (363). Many would have agreed, as Dickens did, with George Eliot's definition of womanliness as "that exquisite type of gentleness, tenderness, possible maternity suffusing a woman's being with affectionateness, which makes what we mean by the feminine character" (Letters IV, 468). And for those sisters keeping house for their brothers Mrs. Ellis, in her book The Women of England, had this advice, with which Dickens would certainly have concurred:

...let his home be made comfortable, let his peculiarities of habit and temper be studiously consulted, and social and familiar gratifications provided for his daily use; and...he will be sure to regard the source from whence his comforts flow with extreme complacency, and not unfrequently with affection. (ch. 8)

Dickens placed supreme value on a woman who gave the man in her life--be he father, brother, or husband--comfort and uncritical affection. It is easy to see why Fred Kaplan has noted Esther's resemblance to Georgina and Mary (287), young women who embodied, at least in Dickens's view, those

qualities of mind and heart most conducive to goodness, ie. his own comfort, as defined, say, by Mrs. Ellis. In 1862, Dickens wrote that Georgina was "Our best and dearest friend, the most unselfish, zealous, and devoted creature that ever lived on earth....No one can ever know what she has been to us, and how she has supplied an empty place"--Mary's (Kaplan 449). Dickens's fiction is filled with self-sacrificing women who make it their life's work and heart's desire to do all and be all to some man--not uncommonly a brother or father.

But the ideal of self-sacrifice is not confined to the often cloying female characters. In the gentle hero we see another kind of virtue in a rather more robust form. Mr. Jarndyce turns himself inside out to help others, but he is saved from being impossibly sweet by his rough exterior (he constantly rubs his hair into a frenzy and is sometimes brusque), the secrecy of his philanthopies, and his emotional reticence.

This reticence, so characteristic of the gentle hero, is never more evident than when he finally brings himself to propose to Esther. Not surprisingly, he does it by letter. First, there are little hints and clues as to what's afoot. Full to bursting with gratitude yet again, Esther is sharing the secret of her mother with her

guardian, when suddenly the truth of their situation dawns on her.

I thanked him with my whole heart. What could I ever do but thank him! I was going out at the door, when he asked me to stay a moment. Quickly turning around, I saw that same expression on his face again; and all at once, I don't know how, it flashed upon me as a new and far off possibility that I understood it.

'My dear Esther,' said my guardian, 'I have long had something in my thoughts that I have wished to say to you.' (BH 461)

He doesn't say it, however. He doesn't trust his powers of expression, and he wants everything to be "deliberately said" and "deliberately considered," so he commits his proposal to pen and paper. There is no lack of warmth between Mr. Jarndyce and Esther, but erotic passion, if present, is not much in evidence. Esther describes the letter: "It was not a love letter though it expressed so much love, but was written just as he would at any time have spoken to me," with "his kind protecting manner, in every line" (BH 462). If part of the gentle hero's mandate is to subdue the erotic wilderness within, Mr. Jarndyce seems to have succeeded admirably. His letter is practical rather than passionate, filled with affection rather than ardor.

Michael Slater has remarked upon the apparent coolness of Dickens's pre-nuptial letters to Catherine, his wife.

"Like the vast majority of all the letters written by Dickens," he notes, "they are more about what he has seen, done, heard and said than about what he has felt" (105). Dickens was capable of great emotion and even of expressing it in letters--his correspondence with and about his "Darling" Ellen Ternan proves that--but the gentle hero, in Dickens as elsewhere, is not allowed to express his feelings except obliquely.

Once again, Esther is terminally grateful, so grateful that she cries her heart out, "as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me. I was very happy, very thankful, very hopeful; but I cried very much" (BH 463). She burns the flowers the handsome young doctor Allan Woodcourt had sent her and decides to tell Ada nothing of what has transpired. Newly engaged women who are madly in love do not cry all the time and keep their engagement a secret from their best friends. Dickens understands, even if Mr. Jarndyce does not, the essential unsuitability of the match, but that is not what interrupts the marriage plans.

Mr. Jarndyce loves Esther very much; of that there is no doubt. He has loved her as a child and he loves her as a woman, but as a gentle hero he would not have his love become a confinement for her, even if it were a comfortable one, full of affection and gratitude. In

the end, marriage should be based on more than that, and when Mr. Jarndyce realizes that it is really Woodcourt whom Esther loves, he contrives to bring them together by not turning up for a scheduled meeting and leaving the way clear for the young doctor. But he does even more than offer opportunity. He gets Woodcourt a position where he will be able to do real good. It is a modest situation that will never bring fame or riches, but it underscores the gentle hero's acquiescence to the attractions of what is possible rather than ambition for what is over-reaching.

'About half a year hence or so, there is a medical attendant for the poor to be appointed at a certain place in Yorkshire. It is a thriving place, pleasantly situated; streams and streets, town and country, mill and moor; and seems to present an opening for such a man. I mean, a man whose hopes and aims may sometimes lie (as most men's do, I dare say) above the ordinary level, but to whom the ordinary level will be high enough after all, if it should prove to be a way of usefulness and good service leading to no other. All generous spirits are ambitious, I suppose; but the ambition that calmly trusts itself to such a road, instead of spasmodically trying to fly over it, is of the kind I care for. It is Woodcourt's kind.' (BH 618)

The gentle hero knows his, and others', limits and works productively within them. (Needless to say, Dickens himself hardly fits this description. Much of his fiction may have an autobiographical basis, but Dickens, that torrent of energy and effort, was, unlike Thackeray, no gentle hero.)

The ever generous Mr. Jarndyce also buys Esther and Allan a house--a new "Bleak House" where they can begin their married life. The house is charming, nestled among apple and cherry orchards, a millrace, a cheerful town, and a cricket pitch. Flowers bloom in great profusion, scenting the "sweet west wind" and freshening the pretty rooms. Esther sees "in the papering on the walls, in the colours of the furniture, in the arrangement of all the pretty objects, my little tastes and fancies, my little methods and inventions which they used to laugh at while they praised them, my odd ways everywhere" (BH 648).

Dickens himself had done something similar when he purchased his house at Gads Hill. On his own he fitted up the bedrooms of his daughters Mamie and Katie, choosing the wallpapers and furnishings he thought they would like. The rooms were lovely and suited the girls very well, but one wonders if they might not have enjoyed the gift more had they been able to participate in its arrangement. Dickens loved to do things for people--in part because he often saw they needed doing but also undoubtedly because he enjoyed the ensuing gratitude. Mr. Jarndyce, as the gentle hero, eschews gratitude, but he gets it all the same.

Dickens's gentle hero is all generosity and good intentions, but there is something rather sickly about

such unrelenting goodness. Indeed, this is a danger for the gentle hero wherever he appears. It is a neat trick to be a moral paragon and a credible human being at the same time. Of the gentle heroes we have looked at here, Mr. Jarndyce comes closest to a maddening perfection; his rumpled hair and retreats to the Growlery in the end are only superficial human touches. He is seen to suffer so little--in contrast to Dobbin or Seth Bede--that we pay less attention than perhaps we should to the pain he suffers when Esther marries Woodcourt. This is partly because it is Esther who describes the closing events of the novel; in her position she would perforce see little of what is going on beneath Mr. Jarndyce's avuncular manner.

But we must assume that Dickens deliberately chooses to leave Mr. Jarndyce's state of mind obscure, focusing instead on the results of his actions rather than any suffering they may cause him. His pain is not at issue in the same way that Dobbin's or Seth's is. This choice of emphasis exemplifies once again the paradoxical nature of Dickens's moral vision: are public acts more important than private motives? Is Mr. Jarndyce's philanthropy in the end preferable to Esther's nobility of character? Or does it all reduce to a question of gender, with men doing and women being?

Esther is willing, Mr. Jarndyce tells Woodcourt's mother, to "sacrifice her love to a sense of duty and affection, and will sacrifice it so completely, so entirely, so religiously, that you should never suspect it, though you watched her night and day." One wonders if he isn't speaking of himself (and Dickens of Georgina) as well. Who can say that Mr. Jarndyce feels no loss just because he doesn't directly confess it? He kisses Esther "in his old fatherly way again and again. What a light, now, on the protecting manner I had thought about," says Esther, seeing only his benevolence and missing the pain behind those repeated kisses and the light of passion about to be extinguished. Mr. Jarndyce, who has placed Woodcourt in his job and bought and decorated his house, now gives Esther to him like a father giving away a bride. "'Allan,' said my guardian, 'take from me a willing gift, the best wife that man ever had....Let me share its [the new Bleak House] felicity sometimes, and what do I sacrifice? nothing'" (BH 650). In truth, he sacrifices a great deal as a man, but as a gentle hero he is morally ascendent.

There is sunlight all around; the wind is from the west, and Mr. Jarndyce is "going to revert to my bachelor habits, and if anybody disregards this warning, I'll run away, and never come back!" (BH 651). The light is now around Mr. Jarndyce, no longer within. Seven years later,

after marriage and the births of two children--the result of sexual experience that is glossed over, to say the least--Esther speaks with more warmth and respect of Mr. Jarndyce than of anyone, even her husband, who often seems something of an afterthought, more treasured for his acceptance of her than her passion for him. ... "I feel towards [Mr. Jarndyce] as if he were a superior being.... I have never lost my old names, nor has he lost his; nor do I ever, when he is with us, sit in any other place than in my old chair at his side. Dame Trot, Dame Durden, Little Woman!--all just the same as ever; and I answer, Yes, dear Guardian! just the same" (BH 664).

Half the novel is Esther's narrative, the other half the authorial narrator's. In neither part do we get inside Mr. Jarndyce, but we do get to know a very great deal about Esther's state of mind and heart, all of which points to his gentle heroism. Esther merely drops clues about Woodcourt early on, sometimes simply mentioning his presence. If this is a love story, which in part it is, it is not the story of Esther and the man she marries. Woodcourt is a good man, a dutiful son, a healer, a rescuer of the endangered. He performs real feats of heroism during a shipwreck and is beloved by his patients, but he is too marginal, too sketchily developed, too little self-sacrificing to qualify as a gentle hero. In many

ways, he functions as the traditional hero who gets the girl, a fine fellow and an appropriate match but a character of limited moral complexity. Slater sees Mr. Jarndyce as a deus ex machina, "who ensures that Esther is saved from herself to achieve the happiness in love that marriage with him would have denied her" (257). But it is Woodcourt who is actually the deus ex machina, lowered onto the stage to keep the gentle hero sexually pure and secure from disillusion.

We may have to infer a good deal of Mr. Jarndyce's complexity, but we certainly get a fuller picture of him than we do of Woodcourt. And it is Esther's love for her guardian that drives her part of the novel. Her entire story is a paean to Jarndyce--her father, her gentle hero--who occupies more of her life and her thoughts than anyone else. Theirs is a relation without sex but not without romantic possibility, one reason why Mr. Jarndyce is a gentle hero, as well as a typical Dickens lover.

Through Esther's eyes Mr. Jarndyce emerges as the model of the good man, as Dickens conceived him. What a contrast he is to the failed fathers and would-be heroes of the larger Dickensian world. There are many fine and noble characters in Dickens's books, but none who surpass Mr. Jarndyce in his role as the gentle hero, with all that implies. Bleak House is famous as one of the first--if

not the first--detective stories. Mr. Bucket's "chase" after Lady Dedlock begins a long train of such scenes in literature and film. The novel is famous as a diatribe against the abuses of Chancery and ineffective social institutions generally and as a novel with as complex a plot as any in Victorian fiction. But ultimately it is Dickens's supreme delineation of the gentle hero, who embodies and epitomizes what Dickens considered the best in human nature. Mr. Jarndyce is a fixed point around which the other characters of Bleak House may careen like billiard balls or crazy planets, a still place where the east wind and the west wind meet, and all is calm.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The gentle hero may not always be the most important character in the book in which he appears, but the gentle hero as a type is a persistent figure in Victorian fiction generally. One is apt to find him in places as diverse as Hayslope and Bleak House, a London townhouse or a country cottage, but it is hard to imagine him as anything other than English. Admittedly, it is next to impossible to generalize about a people and to be consistently accurate at the same time, but when certain characteristics recur in a nation's literature, it is foolish not to notice them.

Although the gentle hero in English literature has very old antecedents indeed, his finest hour is the Victorian period, when England gave the world both the Industrial Revolution with its attendant social disruptions and a body of fiction that explored and defined the moral life in ways that have not been equalled since. To be sure, the nineteenth-century Russian novel may be greater, but of the fiction written in English in the past two hundred years, the Victorian novel must reign supreme, if not for its stylistic elegance and technical innovation,

then for its moral insight and practical influence on human conduct.

The Victorian novel marks a change from earlier literature where conventional heroes abound. The realistic world of Victorian fiction is an unlikely place for the traditional hero, who likes his moral choices to be clear cut and amenable to overt action. When the mise-en-scène is more likely to be a drawing room than a battlefield, a different kind of man is needed, a man who can provide comfort rather than carnage, practical assistance rather than hostility. What is needed is a gentle hero like Thackeray's Dobbin, Eliot's Seth Bede, or Dickens's Mr. Jarndyce--a new kind of hero for a new kind of world.

We can find examples of the gentle hero all the way back to Chaucer, but he really begins to take shape in the eighteenth-century novel when the world of the traditional hero and the world of the gentle hero were still fairly equally balanced. Tom Jones, for example, is a traditional hero who fights vigorously and lusts intemperately through a series of bawdy adventures. We love his youthful gusto, but for moral guidance we must look elsewhere: to the gentle heroism of Fielding's Mr. Allworthy.

The Victorian novel continues a movement away from the supremacy of the traditional hero, in many cases by

explicitly rejecting the ethos of the traditional hero in favor of the less flamboyant, less obvious virtues of the gentle hero. Dobbin, Seth Bede, and Mr. Jarndyce each offer a gentle heroism tailored to fit a modern, newly industrialized world where social order and personal responsibility are brought into new and demanding configurations. The rough-and-ready morality of Tom Jones or Humphrey Clinker gives way in the Victorian period to more subtle moral distinctions, a greater emphasis on the moral drama of ordinary human lives, and the necessity for self-abnegation rather than self-aggrandizement.

As the methods of the traditional hero--physical violence, the assertion of the individual will, the drive for personal glory and fame--were increasingly repudiated in the home island, if not in the Empire, the English turned with more favour to the gentleman as a civilized alternative to the no longer acceptable pyrotechnics of traditional heroism. The gentleman's code was much discussed by the best thinkers of the day--Cardinal Newman, John Ruskin, Dr. Thomas Arnold, to name a few. But while the Victorian gentleman and all he stood for did offer English society a new style of behavior and moral response, the gentleman remained too exclusive a category and too compromised by his potential flaws (snobishness, conceit, preciousness, laziness) to function as a uniformly ideal moral type.

The gentle hero, already sketched out in the pages of Fielding and Goldsmith, provided a more enduring and a more honorable alternative to both the traditional hero and the gentleman.

Because the influence of the gentle hero is often subtle, indirect, or delayed, it is fitting that his role in the novel often seems somewhat peripheral to the main line of action. Sometimes he is a major character--like Dobbin or Mr. Jarndyce--but sometimes he is relatively minor--like Mr. Farebrother in Middlemarch or Mr. Peggotty in David Copperfield. The issue is not his importance to the plot but rather the moral atmosphere he engenders. One can imagine a convocation of traditional heroes from various works--Robin Hood lying in ambush, Ivanhoe brandishing his gleaming sword, or James Bond blowing away his enemies--and how one would long to turn from their egotism and violence to the gentle hero quietly waiting off to one side for the smoke to clear.

The gentle hero knows what the traditional hero does not: that there are no happy-ever-after endings. The seeds of future unhappiness are already sown in today's triumphs; most victories are incomplete. What is required of ordinary human folk is not the crisis intervention of the traditional hero but the persistent goodness of the gentle hero, who sometimes moves to the center of the action and sometimes

stands aside. Of the gentle heroes considered here Dobbin and Mr. Jarndyce are most central to their novels' plots, while Seth frames the action of Adam Bede rather than participating very actively in it.

If centrality to the dynamics of the plot is not an absolute criterion for gentle heroism, what then constitutes the gentle hero's function? What characteristics do Dobbin, Seth, and Mr. Jarndyce share that qualify them, for all their differences, as stellar examples of the type? Each of these characters has at least three things in common with the other two (and with other gentle heroes): he is shy; he loves a good woman whom he cannot have; and his personal morality and inner character are more important than his public accomplishments.

His shyness the gentle hero inherits from the gentleman, who is often, though not always, diffident and retiring. Reticence is a notably English trait, at least among the middle class, and it shows a concern, some might say exaggerated, for the privacy of others. The English generally do not like to intrude upon each other. As the comedian Jackie Mason said after spending a year in London, England is the only country in the world where a person would fall in a river like the Thames and not scream for help. The gentleman is expected to keep a stiff upper lip; his education and background demand that displays

of emotion be controlled. This ideal of restraint can have two results: a lessening of emotional response that leads to moral superficiality or a re-channeling and deepening of emotion that is profound but hidden. It is the second result that informs and exhorts the gentle hero. Dobbin, Seth, and Mr. Jarndyce are all shy nearly to the point of inarticulateness, and all are abidingly loyal to their friends and passionately in love with a woman from whom they must maintain a distance.

Dobbin is undoubtedly the shyest and most awkward of the three, and his social ineptitude is all the more glaring against the arch and artificial background of Regency society. His hands and feet are too big, his movements clumsy, his speech gulping and inelegant. But Thackeray uses Dobbin's quintessential shyness to carry home his criticism of a class of people for whom appearances are everything. In some ways, too, Dobbin's shyness insulates him from the corruptions of a decadent society. A facile charmer would undoubtedly be more exposed to the temptations that Dobbin is not even offered but that Becky, Rawdon, and George cannot resist.

Seth Bede's shyness is less manifest than Dobbin's, but it shows up frequently in his relations with Dinah Morris. He is not particularly shy with his workmates, but with Dinah he is reduced to blushes and strangled

utterance. Sometimes shyness can be another form of egotism, but in Seth it is a mark of the respect, even awe, he has for Dinah. He is shy not because he believes he has little to offer her but because to him she seems the apotheosis of everything he most admires.

Mr. Jarndyce's shyness is in some ways more difficult to explain. He is not elderly, but he is certainly no raw youth. He has undoubtedly had to deal with a variety of men and even some women over the course of his lifetime, and yet he retreats into isolation at the least hint of disturbance. Why does he do this when it seems so clear that what Dickens himself wanted was someone to set to rights the abuses of Victorian society? The answer lies, I believe, in Dickens's realistic assessment of his fellow-man. For many simply keeping clear of corruption is an ethical victory. It takes a unique character to be a savior, and though Mr. Jarndyce is sometimes presented as a kind of Christ figure, it is clear that he is an ordinary man, not a paragon. Dickens raises questions about what ordinary men can do and shows what happens when they try to go farther than their own natures can take them. For a man with such extraordinary energy and such a relish for exhibitionism, Dickens shows remarkable understanding of the quiet reticence of those with different endowments than his own. We may not all be able to solve

overwhelming social problems, but at least the shy man is unlikely to make them worse, and he is still in a position to do real good, as Mr. Jarndyce obviously does.

The gentle hero's relation to his beloved is also crucial to his behavior and moral stature. The women our gentle heroes love are all in need of rescue--both from circumstances and to an extent from themselves. The rescue of a damsel in distress is an old literary convention, but historically it is the traditional hero who does the rescuing. What is new in the Victorian period is the frequent substitution of the gentle hero for the traditional one, a substitution that shifts cultural values away from crude concepts of masculinity to a more subtle, more finely nuanced appreciation of manly gentleness.

We see this gentleness manifested most notably in the sexual response of the gentle hero, which is, predictably, subdued and almost passive. Upon this point there is some variation among our gentle heroes, which reflects their authors' own responses to human sexuality. In Thackeray's Vanity Fair sex is an important ingredient in the plot and in much of the characters' behavior. Becky is a seductress; Rawdon and George are lusty young men-about-town; the Marquis of Steyne is a debauched old reprobate. Sexual love is important to Dobbin too, and he lives in the sexually charged atmosphere of Regency

society that Thackeray satirizes with such cheek. In Dobbin passion is not absent, but it is thwarted. He never achieves the romantic fulfillment he longs for, and the reader sees, even better than Dobbin does, that in Vanity Fair sexual relations are problematic and often exploitive.

George Eliot's approach to love is far less satirical than Thackeray's. She celebrates sex as the ultimate human union, but only when accompanied by personal integrity and mutual consideration. It is a reward not easily won, and those who fail to achieve it--like Seth Bede or Mr. Irwine--may gain moral stature from being denied its comforts. Sexual passion may be what drives Eliot's egoistical characters toward each other and away from too much self-absorption, but it is a less potent, though not absent, force in modifying the character of the gentle hero. Gentle, diffident Seth loves and desires Dinah, but it is black-eyed, strong-armed Adam who weds and beds her. In Adam Bede, as in Middlemarch, Eliot's own romantic preferences betray her into rewarding her heroines with husbands whose main attractions are physical, while allowing the gentle hero to stand aside and accept relative emotional (though not social) isolation.

Sexual love in Dickens is both more problematic and in some ways more interesting--perhaps more for what he leaves out than for what he puts in. Mr. Jarndyce functions

as a father to the woman he loves, and Dickens steers near some very tricky shoals in delineating the relationship between him and Esther. There are a few chaste, fatherly kisses from Mr. Jarndyce and many profuse expressions of gratitude from Esther toward her benefactor, but there is very little one could call erotic that passes between them. In fact, real sex is curtailed at almost every turn: Esther practically moves in with newlyweds Richard and Ada, entering their chamber without so much as a knock on the door. One wonders how they ever manage to conceive a child under such circumstances. And Esther's marriage to Woodcourt is made so little of it can hardly be said to be the most significant relation in her life. We get some six-hundred pages of Mr. Jarndyce and a scant ten or so of Alan Woodcourt and the two children he sires. Passion is surely not a motivating force or an ultimate reward in Bleak House--or so it would seem. In fact, there undoubtedly is a certain amount of eroticism in Bleak House, as there certainly was in Dickens himself, but for whatever reasons, in this novel, as in others, Dickens shies away from treating it as explicitly as Thackeray and Eliot do.

There are many points of comparison--and contrast--among Victorian gentle heroes, but these differences in the treatment of their relations to women, which may seem to separate our gentle heroes, are really

illustrative of the flexible and inclusive definition of the gentle hero. Dobbin, Seth, and Mr. Jarndyce seem superficially to have little in common. They come from different social and economic backgrounds; they inhabit different parts of the country and even different time periods. But each is instinctively moral, each lives primarily to serve the woman he loves, and each fails to establish a satisfactory sexual union with her. Dobbin, of course, does marry an ageing Amelia, but he can hardly be said to have achieved even a part of what poor Richard and Ada do. All this is not to imply that sexual fulfillment is the greatest or only goal of human experience (though some would argue that it is). Rather, sexual passion represents the serious, even sanctified, love of the gentle hero and the degree of sacrifice that love often requires. The gentle hero shows how it is possible to live for others, especially for one other, even when such a life requires the sublimation of one's deepest needs and desires. The gentle hero sets a demanding standard, but his reticence and obvious humanity make his sacrifices seem palatable.

Finally, the gentle hero demonstrates the importance of private morality over public accomplishment. Worldly success is not at issue, as it is, say, for Horatio Alger or Silas Lapham in American fiction. Dobbin accomplishes

very little: a respectable career as an army officer and a book on the Punjab. Nothing remarkable. Seth Bede is a decent enough carpenter and works at his trade, but not so hard or so competently as his brother. And Eliot points out that Mr. Irwine is neither an Oberlin nor a Tillotson--famous divines of the eighteenth century--but merely an ordinary country parson. And Mr. Jarndyce accomplishes absolutely nothing in the larger world. He lives on inherited money in an inherited house. He has no job, not even an avocation. His good deeds are all accomplished close to home and will never make him famous. Dickens resists what one might expect from such a committed social reformer as he was--an energetic hero who would directly address the ills of society. Instead he lets social ills speak for themselves (with a little help from his eloquent pen) and focuses his moral scrutiny on the domestic, private life of the family.

As Eliot makes clear in Middlemarch, most real-life heroines are not St. Theresas. Thackeray's narrator in Vanity Fair lists humble Dobbin as one of the best men he's ever known. And Dickens offers in Bleak House no social redeemer or ideal romantic lover. But these authors--and others in the Victorian period--center their hopes on a figure who is both better than most men and at the same time indistinguishable from common humanity.

The gentle hero represents a triumph of the moral possibilities of ordinary men and women, of people in the middle way of life, whose lives are homely and defined by principles of love and acceptance rather than by ideals of personal grandeur and public achievement.

Dickens's David Copperfield asks whether he is to be the hero of his own life. The figure of the gentle hero in Victorian fiction provides an answer and shows how it is possible for even the most humble to be a hero of a new and gentle kind and to light the way for others. If the Victorian novel represents the triumph of middle-class values, the gentle hero demonstrates the moral possibilities for a new mass of men whose ultimate tests in life are going to be those played out across the dinner table rather than on the ramparts of a castle or the deck of a burning ship.

Many of the traditional hero's attributes remain in the gentle hero--his courage, his loyalty, his engagement with the external world--but in a variety of ways the Victorians anticipated lessons the twentieth century has begun to learn: that traditional heroism can lead to the trenches of the Somme and can easily become an obscenity at Gallipoli or Dienbienphu. C. S. Lewis called for a chivalry that would strike a balance between gentility and aggressiveness. Many Victorian novelists offered gentle

heroes in whom aggression is almost wholly eliminated: Trollope's Plantagenet Palliser, Mr. Harding, and Roger Carbury; Conan-Doyle's Dr. Watson; Hardy's Diggory Venn; Eliot's Mr. Farebrother; Kipling's guru in Kim. Each of these characters contributes something to the definition of the gentle hero and helps to show that he is not an anomaly or an aberration.

The gentle hero offered a new moral perspective to the Victorian audience, but his relevance has not diminished in more recent times. He is not a hold-over from a golden age, hallowed by nostalgia, but a very real, even necessary, moral option for a world of diminishing expectations. He shows not how to achieve glory or to grasp purely personal gratification but how to conduct a life and construct a personality that finds meaning in the tenderest human ties. If the Victorians had given us nothing else, they would still have accomplished much in their gift of the gentle hero, who perhaps was waiting partly formed in the earlier pages of English literature, but who emerges certainly, if diffidently, in the moral triumph of the Victorian novel.

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